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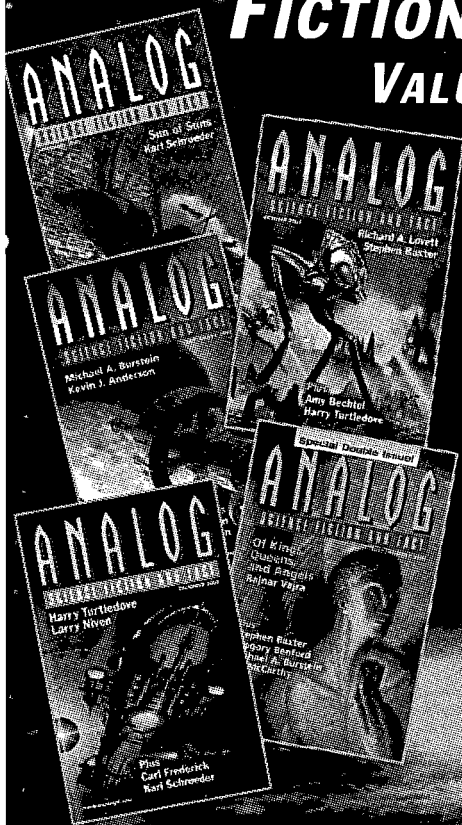


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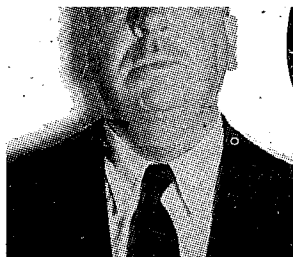
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EDITOR'S NOTES

LINDA LANDRIGAN

EXPOSED TO CRIME!

I bet it's safe to assume that many of AHMM's readers are curious to know the underlying motives that inspire crime—and mystery fiction often satisfies the need to see and experience, however remotely, the darker side of human nature. Our authors offer numerous revelations of base motives and forbidden desires, illuminating some of the darkest recesses of the soul. As readers, we don't just want to know, we want to feel, and that's what fiction offers us.

Our line up this month does just that. Anne Weston returns with her endearing inhabitants of the Costa Rican rain forest, Efraín, his wife Sulema, toddler son Epifanio, and their friend and neighbor Catalino, in a story that explores the hubris of an American survivalist in the rich but strange environment of a foreign land in "The Master of Animals." John C. Boland's "Past Life" looks at a spiritualist hoax and the lonely, gullible (and coincidentally wealthy) widows and widowers who buy into it. We have two historicals this month: Beverle Graves Myers's eighteenth-century private eye Nicco Zianni is employed by a famous lover in "The Casanova Caper," while Ann Woodward's serene and thoughtful Lady Aoi, a lady-in-waiting to a princess in ancient Japan, retreats to the countryside, only to find a murder is stirring up local sentiments. Janice Law probes the evolution of a stalker in "The Commuter," and Kristine Kathryn Rusch looks at pyromania in "Fumes." Robert S. Levinson offers up another tale from the life of Augie Fowler in "Chapter 82: Myrna Lloyd is Missing." And we welcome Thomas Morrissey, the author of "Policy Forbids . . ." Mr. Morrissey is a bartender and college student whose first published short story, "Can't Catch Me," in the Akashic Books anthology *Brooklyn Noir*, won the Robert L. Fish award for Best First Published Story at last year's Edgar Allan Poe awards banquet sponsored by the Mystery Writers of America.

In continuing our year of celebrating AHMM's history of great storytelling, we bring you another tale from the back issues, Clark Howard's "Put Yourself in My Place" (April, 1962), in which a con's ruse to get out of jail free works too well. Mr. Howard is a prolific and award-winning short story writer, but he has also garnered praise for his novels and true crime books.

THE MASTER OF ANIMALS

ANNE WESTON

The two friends were walking home when they came upon the strange sight.

"This hill gets steeper every year," the shorter, square-built one was saying.

"We'll rest at the river crossing, Catalino," the younger man said. "I'm tired too. It's the heat." He hitched up the rope belt that held his pants, their blue faded nearly to white.

The river rippled ahead, glittering in narrow sunbeams that found their way through the leafy branches of the rain forest. Lush ferns crowded the banks, spilling into the water.

"You're kind, Efraín, but my age is catching up with—" Catalino stopped in mid-sentence when he saw the strange sight.

A boy, five or six years old, crouched at the river's edge. He clutched a stick as long as his body, holding it over the water with hands clenched so tight the knuckles showed white. Eyes wide and fixed, he stared into the clear water.

No boy that age lived within an hour's walk. Odder still, this child was a foreigner. Ragged blond hair framed his grimy face. Sweat streaked his sunburned forehead. Infected scratches burned angry red on his thin arms. His shorts and T-shirt were torn and dirty.

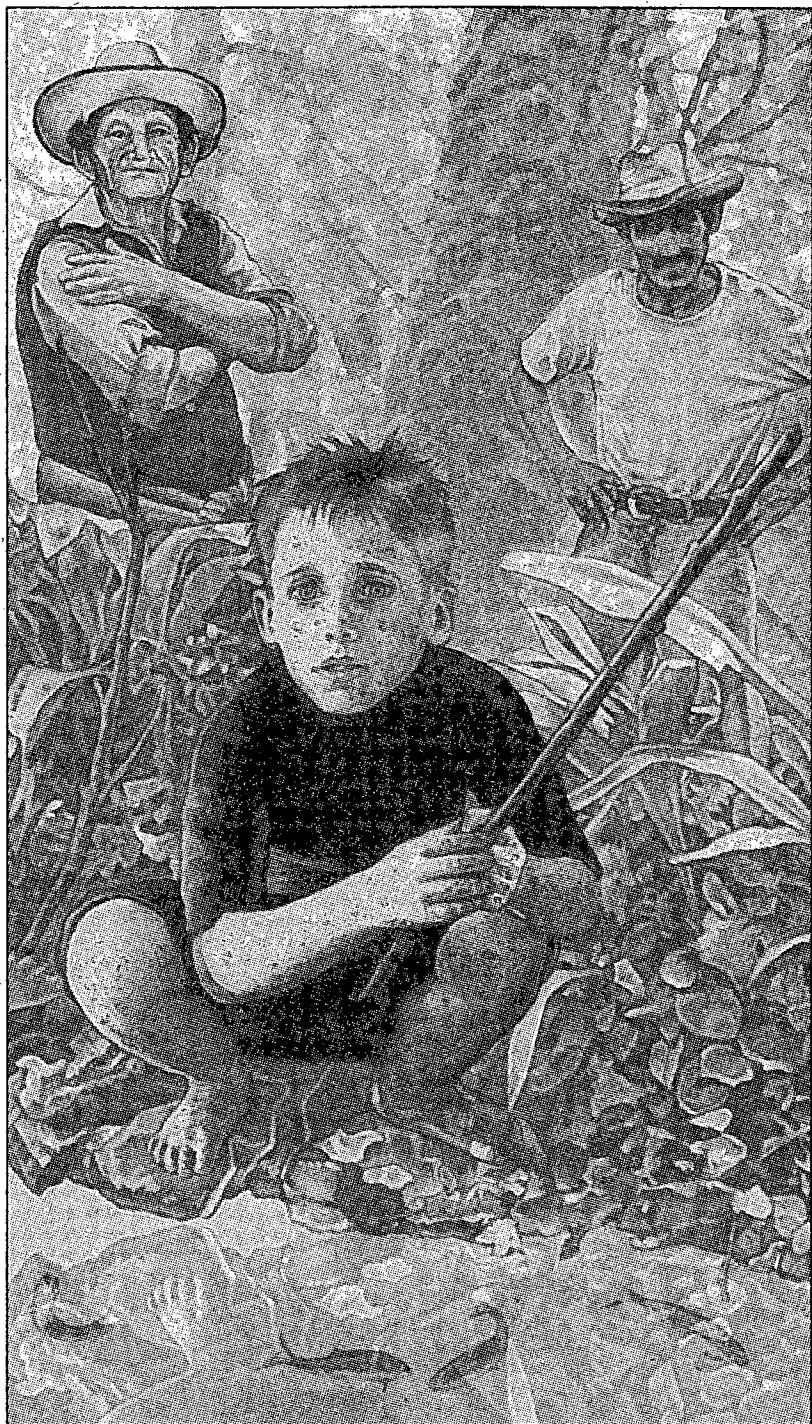
Efraín's mouth dropped open.

The boy didn't glance up. Catalino walked over and squatted beside him. "*Buenos días*," he said.

The boy stayed frozen. His eyes flicked to a minnow-sized fish darting through the clear water. His hands made a minuscule movement toward it with the stick. No line dangled from the pole; it was just a stick, something broken off a bush.

"Maybe he doesn't understand Spanish," Efraín said to Catalino. "Do you think he's one of those foreigners that settled on the other side of the hill? The newcomers?"

"Could be. I haven't seen them yet."



"I saw them once, from a distance, when they were passing my house on the trail. I was going to say hello but they were too far away," Efraín said.

The boy continued to ignore the two men. After a while Catalino said to him, "How's the fishing?" He made a fish shape with his fingers.

The boy's head jerked. His grubby hands tightened on the stick. "They'll settle down soon," Catalino told him. "Right now those fish are busy eating breakfast."

The boy peered harder into the water. He rocked forward on his ripped tennis shoes. Catalino reached out a hand, ready to grab him if he overbalanced.

"The thing about fishing," Catalino went on, "is sometimes you have to sit back and wait for the fish to come to you. Like this." Catalino made a show of stretching his legs out in front of him, leaning back on his elbows, releasing a long breath, and looking around at the jungle. "See over there, that coati, with its tail straight up in the air." Catalino nodded at a furry ring-tailed animal prancing along a mossy log on the far side of the river. In Catalino's experience, a coati's long pointy nose, bright black eyes, and dainty steps never failed to make children laugh.

The boy ripped his gaze away from the river for an instant but pulled it back to the water at once. The coati hopped off the log and hid behind it.

A powerful voice rang through the forest. "Son, son!" An English word Efraín had learned when his cousin had chosen it for her baby's name. The boy gripped his pole tighter.

"Son!" The voice came again, closer this time. Then a tall man stepped out of the trees. His light brown hair and blue eyes matched his foreign voice. He blinked when he saw Efraín and Catalino. Then he strode over to the boy, swept him up in his arms, and hugged him.

The boy didn't let go of the stick. His gaze remained on the water.

A dozen more foreigners straggled out of the woods and clustered behind the tall man. Most were young. They wore pants and shirts mottled in shades of green, dark with sweat. A few had small backpacks. A skinny man with a wispy beard and a bad complexion, still a teenager, had a rifle slung awkwardly across his chest.

The stranger released the boy and turned to Efraín and Catalino. "My name is Luke," he said in Spanish. He reached out and took Efraín's hand in both of his, then Catalino's.

"We must be neighbors," Efraín said. "My friend and I live far-

ther out on the trail. Are you the people who came to live on the other side of the ridge?"

"Yes, we are." Luke smiled. "I guess everyone for miles around has heard about us. I'm sure you're all wondering why a bunch of people from a faraway country would decide to move to the middle of nowhere."

"Well . . ." Efrain would never be so rude as to ask.

"We're just looking for a better life, a purer way of living. I know it sounds ambitious, but we're going to create it here. The earth will give us all we need."

Catalino touched the little boy on the shoulder. He pointed toward the fallen tree. "Watch the end of the log. That coati keeps peeking around it. See?" The coati's foxlike face popped around the log and gawked at them.

The boy kept his eyes on the water but the other foreigners looked. A ripple of laughter moved through the group.

A woman with disheveled blond braids stepped over to the boy. She bent down and spoke softly, pointing at the coati.

The boy lifted his gaze and focused on the animal. Its shiny bulging eyes blinked at him as it raised itself on slender catlike legs for a better view. The boy smiled. The woman spoke some more, the coati chirped a comment of its own, and the boy giggled.

Luke clapped his hands. The coati flinched and ducked behind the log. "Time to get back to camp," Luke said. He turned to Efrain and gestured at a pack one of the men carried. "We've been out collecting food. Roots, leaves, and so on. My son wandered off. I knew he'd be here at the river, though. He never goes far."

Efrain glanced at the jungle roof to gauge the sun's position from the brightness glowing through the leaves. "We should go too. My wife will be wondering what kept me at the store."

"Store!" Luke said. "I didn't think you'd need a store. Aren't you Indians?"

"My friend Catalino is."

"But you're not," Luke concluded. "I'll bet *he* didn't buy anything at the store." He smiled to take any offense from his words.

Efrain was curious. "Are the roots and leaves you collected this morning the same as what you find in your country?" he asked.

"Not exactly. But I found some things that looked similar."

"Catalino knows a lot about which plants are good to eat."

"Good for him. We'll have to compare notes sometime. But right now my friends and I need to be on our way."

The boy was sitting on the riverbank again. He watched as the coati poked its nose around the end of the log. "Good luck with your fishing, *niño*," Catalino told him. The boy didn't move.

Efraín glanced back as he and Catalino waded into the river crossing. The foreigners had gathered around the man. The child hunched forward, fingers still clenched around the stick, staring hard into the river.

With it being the dry season now, they didn't even have to take off their rubber boots to cross. The water would stay below the boot tops as long as they kept to the side, staying out of the deeper pool where the river curved. Even there, though, the water was barely waist deep.

"Good thing the foreigner didn't get a look in your pocket to see what you bought at the store," Efraín said to his friend as they emerged from the river.

"I do like a sweet now and then," Catalino admitted. "Why shouldn't I go to the store and buy it?"

Efraín and Catalino hiked on. A big rainbow-colored parrot perched on a tree limb, filling the air with raucous shrieks and whistles. The cicadas' drone rose and fell. Delicate lavender flowers tumbled from a vine high above and drifted about them on the light morning breeze.

Suddenly a rifle shot cracked through the forest. The parrot snapped off its song and the cicadas hushed. A faint small cry came after.

The two men stopped. "Maybe a nice fat agouti came along and they shot it to stew with their roots and leaves," Efraín said.

"Possibly so."

Neither man moved forward. "Shall we go back and see?" Efraín asked.

Catalino nodded. They retraced their steps.

The crossing was empty of people. They heard far-off fragments of Luke's calm voice and the sound of people crunching through dry leaves on the trail.

Efraín shrugged. "I guess everything's all right."

Catalino stood still, his gaze searching their surroundings. He walked to the fallen tree and bent down. He straightened up, holding the coati by the scruff of its neck. The animal hung limp, its chest gobbled with dark blood.

Catalino flung the coati as far away from the river as he could, so it wouldn't contaminate the water. He and Efraín returned to the trail and walked toward their homes.

They paused at the side path into Efraín's yard. "I don't understand," Efraín said.

Catalino adjusted his palm-leaf hat. "Neither do I. Who can

afford to waste a bullet on something you're not going to eat, that can't hurt you?"

Efraín shook his head. "Stop for a glass of coffee before you walk home, Catalino."

The men threaded their way among squash vines and banana plants, winged beans and papaya trees, toward Efraín's palm-thatched hut in the center of the clearing. A small child dressed in purple shorts tottered through the yard, grabbing at the tail feathers of a strutting red rooster that stayed just out of his reach. A gray filly ambled after the toddler.

"Hey, Epifanio!" Efraín called to him. "You've started a parade!" The toddler laughed and lunged again at the elusive rooster. "The store had lime, Sulema," Efraín continued. "You won't have to use ash to make the tortillas."

A young woman with long black hair peered into an iron pot that simmered over the outdoor cooking fire. Her flower-print dress reminded Efraín of the parrot, green and yellow, crimson and turquoise. She looked up and smiled. "Good, taking ashes out of the fire is messy. And you're just in time, the corn's starting to boil."

Efraín pulled a newspaper-wrapped parcel out of his bark-cord bag and handed it to his wife. "Is that other pot of water on the fire for coffee?" he asked hopefully.

"Yes, I just roasted some. I'll stir the lime into the corn and then bring us coffee. Sit down, Catalino." Sulema picked up a big wooden spoon that Efraín had carved.

"Ah, coffee." Catalino walked to the water bucket, took the dipper, and rinsed his hands and face. Then he settled himself on the split-log bench under the rose-apple tree while Efraín washed up.

Sulema brought glasses of hot coffee, creamy with milk fresh from the cow. She sat in the rocking chair that Efraín had made her. "Now tell me about your trip to the store," she said. "What's new in the community?"

Efraín took a long drink. "Nobody was at the store but the storekeeper, so we didn't hear much gossip. He did say that those foreigners still haven't come to shop. He thinks they're trying to live without buying anything from a store."

"We've all done that," Sulema pointed out.

"Of course, all those years before Lencho started the store. But I wonder if these people know how to go about it. We met them this morning at the crossing. Some of them looked awfully thin. I wanted to see the roots and leaves they'd collected, but I was afraid they'd think I was nosy."

Catalino frowned. "I hope they don't poison themselves."

"I forgot to tell you," Efrain went on. "You know Enrique, who lives beyond the store. I saw him the other day. He and his wife went to the foreigners' place to welcome them to the neighborhood. They took pineapple sprouts and sweet potato cuttings, and offered to show the foreigners how to plant them. A man—it must have been the one who calls himself Luke—thanked them but said he knew how to farm. Enrique said they hadn't even built a proper house to live in, when there were palms all around with fronds perfect for a roof, and plenty of sturdy cane growing nearby for siding. They were living under pieces of canvas tied to the trees."

"Hmph." Catalino reached into his pocket and offered everyone a small puffy store cookie, pink as a tropical sunrise.

Sulema took one and leaned forward in her rocking chair. "And today you actually met these foreigners. Tell me about them."

Efrain explained about the little blond boy fishing with a pole but no line, how he finally laughed at the coati, and how they came back and found it dead.

"That is odd," she said. "Only the one young man had a gun?"

"Yes." Catalino wrinkled his forehead. "I can't figure out why he shot it. It reminds me of a story my grandfather told." He drained his glass. "But I'm keeping you from your chores, Sulema. I know you have to grind that corn once it's cooked, so you can make the tortillas for lunch. I'll go on home."

"Don't you dare!" Sulema said. "Not without telling us the story." She grabbed his glass and refilled it from the tin pot that perched on a rock by the fire.

Catalino's lined face crinkled. "All right." He sipped his coffee. "Well. You know my grandfather grew up in the *montaña salvaje*, the savage wilderness. He never was in a building put together with nails till he was an old man."

"Your house doesn't have a nail in it, and neither does ours," Sulema pointed out.

"Yes, of course, all the poles are lashed together with vines, but we've all *seen* nails, and been in houses built with them, and in buildings made of cement blocks, in town. But not my grandfather. He was raised in the old ways. When he was a boy, on a rainy day, he'd sit by his grandfather and learn to make arrowshafts from black palm, or twist rope from wild pineapple stalks. At night they'd sit by the fire with meat from the day's hunt hanging on vine cords to dry. And all that time his grandfather would tell stories he heard from *his* grandfather. That's how children back then learned the lessons they'd need to go through life."

The baby Epifanio wobbled over and crawled onto Efrain's lap.

Catalino flicked a crumb of pink cookie from his pants leg to a hen waiting under the bench. "In those days, people still believed in the Master of Animals," he said. "That was the god who kept all creatures of the earth in balance, who set limits so that one kind of animal could not annihilate another.

"The Master of Animals had trouble with people. People had bows and arrows and spears and traps, and that gave them too much advantage. The Master of Animals saw that people would soon kill all the beasts of the forest unless he thought of a way to keep them within limits too." Catalino took a bite of cookie and chewed.

"So what did he do?" Sulema asked.

"He set forth certain laws. One was that people could not kill what they didn't need. Another was that each clan could hunt only one particular animal. One clan could hunt the wild pig, another could take the little red deer, another the tapir, and so on."

"Didn't people get tired of eating only the meat they were allowed to hunt?" Sulema asked.

"The clans shared what they caught, so everyone got to eat different meats, but each hunter could kill none but the animal permitted to his clan. If a hunter couldn't find his clan's animal—a deer, let's say—but got a perfect chance at a wild pig, he had to remember the law. He might be very hungry, his wives might be waiting at home with the fire going and nothing in the pot, but the hunter couldn't use his arrow on the pig, because it was forbidden to him."

"Suppose he killed the pig anyway?" Efraín asked.

"If a man broke a law, the Master of Animals corrected him." Catalino studied the last chunk of his cookie. "He taught him a lesson. But sometimes the man was too stubborn to accept that lesson."

"Don't make us keep asking," Sulema complained. "What would happen then?"

Catalino smiled faintly. "The Master of Animals could appear as any beast he wished. One morning the lawbreaker would be walking the trail happy and carefree, not remembering the time he broke the taboo. A little speckled bird might hop in front of him. He'd think nothing of it. But all of a sudden the bird became a jaguar, and that was that." Catalino shrugged. "'He-who-kills-with-one-bite,' the jaguar was called."

The old man set his glass on the bench beside him. "Now, here is the story that my grandfather told me, that his grandfather told him. I don't know who will tell it after me."

Epifanio watched him with wide dark eyes from Efraín's lap.

"My grandfather said: Once a man was hunting in the high hills of the forest, far from home," Catalino began. "It was the dry time of year, and in those hills there were no rivers. But the man knew of one spring, a water-eye, people called it, where sweet water bubbled out of the earth. All the people knew the spring was there, and all the animals too, and all used it when they were thirsty, people and animals alike, they shared it.

"On this day the man had been hunting since dawn. Now it was midday, and very hot. He hadn't caught any game and he was parched from thirst, so he headed for the water-eye. As he got closer he imagined the cool water going down his throat, he felt his sweaty face plunging into the pool.

"But when he reached the water-eye, he found he wasn't the only thirsty one. A troop of coatis spread around the little pool with their noses in the water, taking sips. They'd been a long time without water. They were so thirsty they didn't flee, or even chirp in fright when the man walked up.

"Now, he could have waited for the coatis to finish. There was plenty of water bubbling up fresh all the time. But he was angry because he hadn't had luck hunting. He grabbed a heavy stick and charged at the coatis, swinging the club, striking them, mothers and babies.

"The coatis fled, and the man proceeded to have his drink. When he had drunk all he wanted, he sat back and looked around. He saw that the coatis had come back, they were still thirsty. They were hiding in the bushes, waiting for him to leave so they could drink some more.

"The man had an idea. 'I'll show you who's boss,' he said to the coatis. He straddled the spring and pulled down his pants, and, well—" Catalino glanced at Sulema in embarrassment. "—he fouled the water.

"He stood up. 'Drink all you want, coatis,' he said, and laughed. He set off down the trail, he knew it well. He'd be home before dark. He passed all the familiar landmarks: the giant strangler fig, the strange round rock put there by the ancestors, the grove of chocolate trees, and the place where passion fruits grew. 'I'm nearly home now,' he thought.

"Just when he was certain his house was right up ahead, he came around a bend in the trail—and he was back at the water-eye!

"'How did that happen?' he wondered. 'I must have gotten disoriented.' He was terribly thirsty, but the sight of that putrid brown water made his stomach heave. The man set off again, this time paying extra attention to the trail.

"He walked, and walked, and walked. He passed the strangler fig

and the round rock, and the chocolate trees and the passion fruits, and there was the last bend in the trail. His house *had* to be there—but all of a sudden, he was at the water-eye again!

"By now his tongue was swollen and the inside of his mouth felt like a leaf from a sandpaper tree. He staggered over to look at the water, hoping it had cleared. But there in the middle of the little pool floated his turds, looking bigger than before. 'I'll try going home another way,' he thought, and set out again.

"Over and over that day he walked, trying to get home. No matter which way the man tried, he ended up at the water-eye, and every time the water was more foul. Night fell, and still he stumbled on. Even though it was dark he knew by the stench each time he returned to the water-eye. His thirst choked him.

"He was crawling by the time dawn came. He couldn't close his mouth. His swollen tongue stuck out through his lips, and as he crawled, he had to stare at it. He came again to the water-eye. Now he was dragging himself on his belly. He pulled himself over to the spring, and soiled and reeking as it was, he put his face in the water and drank his own filth. The Master of Animals humbled the arrogant man."

Catalino swallowed the last of his coffee. "So you see, the guardian of the forest brings back upon you the wickedness that you do to others, even to animals. That was the lesson my grandfather's grandfather taught him with that story."

Efraín saw some of the foreigners the next time he hiked down the long hill to the store. The young man with the sparse beard stood on the store's porch, leaning over the counter that divided the customer area from the storekeeper's domain. He no longer wore the rifle. He was talking to Lencho the storekeeper in what Efraín assumed was English.

The thin woman with blond braids sagged against the unpainted wood siding of the store. Efraín wasn't sure how old she was; the skin on her face drooped, but Efraín thought it might be more from weariness than from age. Her braids were fastened with elastic bands, their cheery red in sharp contrast to her apathy. The little boy Efraín had seen at the river sat on the raised porch, legs dangling. He held the same stick over the dirt storeyard and stared into the dust.

The man was showing his wristwatch to Lencho. He seemed to be praising it. Then he put the wristwatch on Lencho's wrist. The band was scratched silvery metal. The buckle was broken, so the man had pushed a little piece of wire through either side of the band. He twisted the wires together to hold the watch on

Lencho's wrist. Then he pointed at the shelf behind the storekeeper where a dozen flat blue cans of sardines were stacked in a neat pyramid, and above them, at a package of crackers. Every now and then he glanced over his shoulder at the trail that came down the hill.

Lencho looked up. "Say, Efraín, tell me what you think of this watch," he said, holding out his arm.

"I don't know anything about watches," Efraín answered doubtfully, peering at it. He saw that one of the little bars moved briskly around the surface, while another moved slightly, and the third bar stayed still.

"The most important thing for a watch to do is to tell the right time," Lencho explained. "But no one's come by the store with a watch since these people got here, so I can't check it."

"I thought you had a watch."

"Yes, but this morning my wife and the girls walked out to catch the bus to town, and I let my wife wear the watch."

"To town by themselves! Is someone sick?"

"No. They went to see about starting the oldest girl in the school there. She could stay with my cousin. That one Soto boy is hanging around here too much. 'What kind of life will he give her?' my wife keeps saying. 'Look at the rest of that family.' And she's right. So we're thinking about sending the girl to school."

Efraín nodded. "The world is changing, anyway. I think maybe our children will have to go to school to get along in it."

The woman had sunk down on the dirt of the storeyard in the hot sun. She wrapped her arms around her legs and rested her head on her knees. Lencho brought a stool from behind the counter and set it on the shaded porch. He touched the young man's arm and pointed at the woman and then at the stool.

The man spoke to the woman. "Rose!" He had to call several times before she raised her head. He went over, helped her stand, and led her to the stool.

Lencho returned to studying the watch.

"You already have one watch. What would you do with another?" Efraín asked.

"If we do send our girl to school, she'll need a watch to get to classes on time."

"And if you decide not to send her, you can always sell this one to somebody."

Lencho tapped the watch. "As long as it tells good time. But that's the problem, how do I know? These people look pretty hungry. I don't know how they could be hungry, when there's food all around. I tried to tell this fellow he could help himself to

those green bananas, but he didn't seem to understand." Lencho waved at the banana plants, heavy with clusters of immature fruit, that dotted the storeyard. "It was almost like he didn't know how to eat green bananas—but everybody knows that, don't they?"

Efraín considered. "You'd think so. Unless—could it be that bananas don't grow in his country?" He looked at the banana plants, then past them at the line of fruit trees stretching along the path out of sight toward the bus stop. He saw the deep green of mango trees, the shiny lacquer finish of water-apple leaves, and in the distance a cashew tree with a light frosting of early blooms. "Anyway, soon all those trees will be producing. We'll make sure these people know to eat the fruit."

Lencho nodded. "It's really something how all those trees have grown from seeds people have thrown down, eating fruit while they walked to the bus. But back to my problem: I hate to make these hungry people wait till someone comes along with a watch so I can check the time. But I can't buy a watch that doesn't work right. People would say I'm a pushover, and they'd forever try to take advantage of me." The storekeeper sighed.

The young man seemed to guess what Lencho was saying. He pointed at the sun, almost straight overhead, and then at the watch. Lencho looked confused, and then said, "He's right! It's almost midday. That means the hands on the watch should point at twelve when the sun is straight overhead." Lencho put a finger at the top of the watch.

Efraín looked at Lencho's hand on the watch face. "Why would putting your hands on the watch tell you that the watch is working? You could do that any time you chose."

"Oh. These little bars, they're called hands. Some move slow and some move fast, but they all move. See, even this short one has moved since you got here." Lencho looked over at the woman slumped on the stool. The little boy still grimly held his fishing pole. "In fact, the watch says it's eleven forty now. That's almost midday. I'll take your opinion, Efraín. Do you think the sun is as high overhead as it's going to get today?"

Efraín placed his hand above his eyes and turned his face up. When he felt the sunrays at their hottest, he had his head bent far back. "I think so, Lencho," he said.

Lencho walked over to the sardine pyramid. "Hmm. A watch costs, well, I'm not sure. This one is heavy. I think that means it's expensive. But the band is broken." He jiggled the watch and held it to his ear.

"What are you checking for now, Lencho?" Efraín asked.

The storekeeper chuckled. "I don't know. I just thought I should

do something else before I agreed to the trade." He reached across the counter and shook the young man's hand. Then he reached for the box of crackers and half a dozen sardine cans. He set them on the counter.

The young man examined the shelves. There wasn't much else in the way of food, mostly salt, chunks of brown sugar, and pink cookies. Flashlight batteries, ropes in different widths, fishing filament, and a few pairs of rubber boots took up the rest of the shelf space. He spotted a box of cornflakes behind a pair of rubber boots and some canned Vienna sausages sitting on a big tortilla griddle. "*Por favor*," he said, pointing at them.

Lencho heaved another sigh and fetched the items.

The foreign man ripped apart the cracker package. He opened a tin of sardines and set it in front of the woman. Lencho handed her a spoon and she began to cram sardines and crackers into her mouth. She spoke for the first time, calling to the boy, who didn't budge. The young man opened another can of sardines and held it out to the boy, who only clutched his stick harder.

Efraín pulled a hibiscus leaf from a nearby bush and used it to pick up one of the sardines by its tail end. He held the sardine at the end of the boy's stick and waved the little fish back and forth. "Flip-flop, look what you caught!" he said.

The boy looked startled. Then he laughed. Efraín offered the sardine to the boy with the hibiscus leaf napkin. The boy grabbed it, gulped it down, and took the tin.

The woman had finished her sardines and was stuffing cornflakes into her mouth. The man was chomping on Vienna sausages. His eyes kept flicking toward the trail. He reminded Efraín of an agouti feasting on fallen breadfruit but unable to enjoy it for fear a wildcat would show up.

Efraín wanted to ask the young man why he'd shot the coati. He was trying to figure out how to ask when the man stopped eating and jumped up. He grabbed the rest of the tins and began to stow them in the pockets of his pants. Though he carried a small backpack, he didn't put the food in it. He seemed to be checking his pockets to see if the tins showed, and redistributing them if they did. He yanked the cornflakes bag out of its box, smashed it to flatten the remaining flakes, and dropped the bag down his loose shirt. Then he helped the woman up and they set off on the path. The little boy trailed behind.

Efraín and the storekeeper looked at each other. Lencho raised his eyebrows and then fell to admiring his watch.

Several days later Efraín and Sulema were on the outdoor bench

shelling black beans when the young man who'd traded the watch walked into their yard. "Bus?" he said, and tapped his wrist where he used to wear the watch. A pale band showed on his sunburned skin.

"You want to know what time the bus leaves?" Sulema said. She held up six fingers. "*En la mañana*," she added, and pointed to the east where the sun rose.

The man glanced over his shoulder at the trail.

Sulema cut a leaf from the banana plant that drooped over her head. She wrapped a couple of freshly-fried pineapple turnovers in it and handed them to the man. He snatched them from her, nodded, and hurried off.

"Maybe Luke has decided to take them all back to their own country," Efraín said.

Sulema watched the young man disappear down the trail. "I hope so."

The next day Efraín was sitting by the outdoor fire finishing breakfast when he heard Luke's hearty voice. "Hello, neighbor!"

Efraín looked up. "Good morning, Luke. Would you like something to eat?"

The foreigner walked over to the cookfire. He smiled but kept rubbing his hand across his face. The woman with the braids trailed after him like a shadow. The little boy drifted behind her, dragging his stick.

"No, thanks," Luke said. He plopped down on the bench. "I'm afraid something's happened. My friends have gotten lost. Have you seen them today?" He wiped his hand across his mouth as though cleaning off jam.

Sulema had come out to soothe the cackling hens, who were upset by these strange people making themselves at home in the yard.

"I haven't seen them today," Efraín said carefully. "Did they say where they were going?" He glanced at the woman and boy, who hovered farther out in the yard.

"No." Luke paused, as though considering whether to say more. "You see, my friends have had trouble adjusting to life in the wilderness. I told them they must try harder, and have patience." He stopped.

"Life in the wilderness is difficult at first," Efraín agreed.

"Everything would have worked out if it hadn't been for Jason. You know, that guy who can't even grow a decent beard." Luke shook his head sadly. "He started saying that we should give up and go back to civilization. I told him he was sowing seeds of sorrow,

that he would cause people to get hurt, but he kept whispering behind my back. He badgered them. They're young, most of them, and they've been lost all their lives. I rescued them one by one. They *believe* in me. But they're easily swayed. Now it looks like Jason's talked them into running away . . . they'll be frightened without me." Luke twisted his fingers together. "I have to find them."

Sulema spoke. "Maybe they've just gone looking for food in the forest. When did they leave?"

"When I got up this morning they were gone, all but Rose and the little kid." Luke rubbed his face again.

"Why not go back to your place and see if they're there?" Sulema asked.

Luke took a deep breath and let it out. "No. I'm going to take the trail down the hill. I expect they mean to catch the bus there where the road ends." He stood up. "I should be able to catch up with them while they're waiting for it. I'll talk to them. They'll realize I'm right. Why should they go back to the States? They've got nothing there, and no one who wants them." Luke started toward the trail.

Efraim was relieved that Luke hadn't asked him about the bus schedule, because of course it only came once a day and was long gone. He hoped Jason and the others had reached it in time.

Luke wheeled around. "You know what hurts the most?" he said. He clenched his jaw and the tendons flexed. "That it was Jason who betrayed me. He was a throwaway boy, living on the street any way he could, and I took him in. He was the first one. I gave him something to believe in, something to work for, and this is how he repays me." Luke used his sleeve to wipe a tear from his cheek.

Sulema walked over to a scarlet hibiscus bush, parted the branches, and peered in toward the base.

Efraim looked at the blond woman, standing with her shoulders slumped and her head lowered. What was her name—Rose? He tried to catch her eye, but she wouldn't look up. "Are you sure you won't eat something? Sulema's gathering eggs."

"I'm not hungry." Luke swallowed. He was sweating in the cool morning air. He rolled his shoulders. "I saw the oddest thing this morning," he continued. "I'd forgotten. It happened as soon as I walked out of my tent."

"What did you see?" Efraim asked.

Luke kneaded his forehead. "I—I'm not sure. I came out of my tent and there was an owl sitting on the ground in front of me."

"An owl, in the daytime? On the ground?"

"It looked straight at me. I blinked. It must have flown then because when I opened my eyes it was gone. There was just a big ugly bug there. I stepped on it." He rubbed his jaw. "Then I saw how empty the camp was, and I forgot the owl."

Sulema rejoined them, her hands full of speckled brown eggs. "We've eaten," she told the foreigners. "But the hens have laid more eggs, enough for all of you to have breakfast." She gestured at the woman and child.

"There's no time," Luke said. "I've got to save my people." He spun on his heel and hurried back to the main trail, covering the ground with long strides.

The woman trudged after. She never raised her eyes from the ground.

The little boy glanced over his shoulder as he turned to follow. Efraín waved.

Efraín and Sulema looked at each other. "He didn't ask if we'd seen his friends yesterday," Efraín said. "I hope they made it to the bus all right. They'll be halfway to town by now."

Sulema nodded. "I wish the woman and the boy had gone too."

Epifanio was standing under the mango tree, looking up into its dense greenery and chattering in his own invented language. "Who are you talking to, Epifanio?" Efraín asked.

"Bird." Epifanio pointed. "Nice bird."

Efraín glimpsed movement in the tree. A long, emerald green feather slipped through the mango leaves. The plume floated into Epifanio's waiting hands.

"It's a big parrot," Efraín told him. "Look, it sent you a feather!"

The parrot took flight, following the path of the foreigners.

They heard reassuring news of the missing people later that morning when Catalino stopped in. "Mr. Soto came by my place a little while ago," he said. "He'd been to the store to see if Lencho got those horseshoes he ordered last week."

"Oh, that's right," Efraín said. "Mr. Soto was telling me his mare needs shoes, with him planning to drive his cattle out to market soon."

Catalino shook his head. "His cows are lean. He won't get a good price."

Efraín agreed. "Those sons of his aren't workers. They've let weeds take over their pasture. There's not enough grass to keep a cow healthy."

Sulema interrupted. "Forget the cows and horseshoes. Did Mr. Soto mention anything about the foreigners?"

"Yes, but I'll have to tell you more about the horseshoes to

explain." Catalino crinkled the corners of his eyes.

Sulema made a face. "All right."

"Well, Lencho ordered the horseshoes from the hardware store in town. He asked the bus driver to pick them up and bring them out on the bus. Of course, the road ends before the store, so the bus driver would have to ask someone getting off the bus and going toward the store to carry the shoes to Lencho."

"Of course." Sulema spoke impatiently.

"The driver brought the shoes this morning," Catalino continued. "One of the passengers carried them out to Lencho, and passed on the news that a group of foreigners had gotten on the bus for the trip back to town. They didn't have money so they were trading flashlights, packs, anything the driver would take for bus fare."

Efraín breathed a relieved sigh. "I'm glad they made it." He told Catalino about Luke's visit that morning. He mentioned the owl that had appeared to Luke in the daytime.

Catalino was quiet for so long Efraín thought he wasn't interested. Then he said, "The owl warned him to let things be. But he paid no attention. He stepped on the beetle and set out to hunt people who didn't want to be with him. He wouldn't accept his lesson."

After lunch Efraín headed for the river to catch crayfish. He carried his favorite crayfish stick, forked just right to pin the shellfish down while he grabbed it, avoiding its pincers. The crayfish would taste good for dinner, simmered in coconut oil with garlic-vine leaves and sweet peppers from Sulema's garden.

He hoped the little boy would be sitting on the riverbank again. He would show the child how to catch crayfish. With so much food around, it was ridiculous for those people to be hungry. It was strange that Luke didn't care to learn how the forest could feed them.

The boy wasn't at the river. Efraín took off his boots, rolled up his pants, and waded into the cool river. He would go to the far bank where crayfish liked to hide under the big rocks by the deeper pool. He watched his reflection accompany him on the water, wavering alongside, then vanishing as he neared the pool and moved out of sun into shade.

But as he stepped into the pool his reflection came back. First he thought it was a trick of the light, but this image fell wrong. Its head began near Efraín's feet, and its feet were downstream. The shape lay parallel with the bank, alongside an old submerged log.

Efraín stopped and raised his arms. The figure in the water kept

its arms at its sides. The image swayed gently as though dancing with the log.

This was no reflection. Efraín returned to the bank, set down his crayfish stick, took off his clothes, and waded back into the pool. He sucked in air and ducked underwater. Seizing the man's shirt, he tried to pull him out. Efraín strained and tugged but couldn't break the river's grip.

Efraín came up for a breath of air. He knew who it was. The wispy beard and thin frame had told him.

Submerging again, Efraín felt around till he found what held the man: the strap of his backpack was caught on a short branch that stuck out from the underside of the log. Efraín tried to pull the body upstream to slacken the strap but couldn't.

He stood and took a breath. Why wouldn't the river give up this poor soul? He dove under again. With his eyes open in the clear water, he seized another branch stub and pulled himself close to the bottom of the pool. He looked at the pack strap where it was caught. The strap had twisted several times around the stub.

Efraín gripped the strap and managed to unwind it. He dragged the body to shore. Except for the sparse beard, it looked like a child.

Like a funeral offering, a cluster of tiny ivory flowers was caught in the buckle where the strap crossed the man's chest. The cashew blossoms were fresh, the petals full and bright. Efraín laid the body gently on the riverbank, dressed, and took the trail home to tell Sulema.

As Efraín walked, he thought of the foreigners rushing through the predawn darkness toward the bus. He pictured the line of refugees spread out, no one knowing who was where. Jason, the instigator of the mutiny, coming last to shepherd his flock. Stumbling through the crossing, cutting too sharp across the bend in the river. Staggering as he stepped into the deeper pool. Falling into the water, trying to stand but held down, not realizing that his pack strap had caught on the log. Panicked, his struggles forcing the strap on tighter.

Drowning alone in the dark water.

His companions not realizing he was gone until they were on the bus.

Mr. Soto happened to be passing just as Efraín reached his house, and Catalino was already there visiting, so he only had to tell his story once. Mr. Soto was riding his mare to the store to complain that horseshoe nails hadn't come with the horseshoes.

He said he would tell Lencho to send word of the death to the judge in town.

Catalino offered to go sit with the body until someone official came. He set off with Mr. Soto, who held his horse to a walk, not eager to come upon the dead man by himself. Efraín and Sulema watched them disappear down the trail.

Efraín cocked his head. "What's that sound? Like someone crying."

Sulema hurried to check the baby where he dozed in a hammock slung between two trees. The whimpering grew louder. "It's not Epifanio—" Sulema began. Then the skinny blond woman stumbled into the yard. She had a bloody nose and a bruise spreading on her cheek. One of her braids had come undone. She clutched the boy by the hand. His stick dragged behind him. She was crying; the boy was stoic.

The woman seemed to be asking a question. Efraín caught a word she kept repeating: 'Jason.' He didn't want to tell her what had happened. "Her name is Rose," Efraín told Sulema.

"Come, Rose," Sulema told her, beckoning. "Sit down." She settled the foreigners on the bench under the rose-apple tree, then took a tin plate, piled on fried plantains left from lunch, and crumbled homemade cheese on top. She handed it to the guests. The boy began to eat, but the woman bowed her head and wept.

"I think she knows her friend is dead." Sulema put her hand on Rose's bony shoulder.

"We'd better take her to him."

Sulema ran a comb through her long black hair and straightened her dress. Then she tried to smooth Rose's hair. Both the braids were loose now, but the hair was too tangled for Sulema's comb to help.

Efraín picked up Epifanio and set the toddler on his shoulders. He made come-along gestures to the foreigners and they all set off along the path to the river crossing.

When they reached the river, Catalino was sitting on the bank beside Jason. The old man had something in his hands; he stuffed it in his pocket as they approached.

Rose cried out and ran to the drowned man. She knelt beside him, sobbing. The little boy glanced at the body and wandered to the riverbank. He sat down and stuck the stick out over the water.

Efraín set Epifanio down and squatted by the body. "I want you to look at something," he said to Sulema and Catalino. He touched the small cluster of flowers lodged in the pack buckle. In their short time out of the water the flowers had already begun to wilt. "It's early for cashew trees to bloom. In fact, I only know of one

tree with flowers. It's near the store, on the way to where the bus stops." He looked at the others.

"I haven't seen any other cashews blooming yet," Catalino agreed, squatting beside him.

"These flowers couldn't have been off the tree for more than an hour when Jason fell into the water," Efraín continued. "If they'd caught on his pack the other day when he was at the store trading his watch, they'd have turned brown that same day."

"But that means—" Sulema stopped. "Epifanio, come here!"

The toddler was ambling toward the riverbank. Efraín fetched him back.

From his pocket Catalino took a small round river stone, polished glossy black. "Here, baby, sit down and hold this rock for me." He handed the stone to Epifanio and turned back to the others. "The flowers tell us that Jason walked down the hill with his friends early this morning to make sure they reached the bus. He brushed against the cashew tree and this sprig of flowers caught on the buckle. Then right away he walked up the trail. He was on his way back to their camp when he drowned."

"But why come back, when he was at the bus?" Efraín asked. "Why didn't he leave with his friends?"

"That's easy." Sulema tilted her head at Rose, who was hunched over now, gripping a corner of the young man's shirt as though trying to pull him back from wherever he'd gone. "She wouldn't, or couldn't, leave when he took the others this morning. Jason came back for her and the boy."

Efraín thought of an objection to this idea. "By then it would have been daylight. How could he have missed the regular crossing place, stumbled into the pool, and fallen so hard that he almost hit the bottom? He had to, for the strap to catch on the branch stub. The pack isn't heavy enough to have weighed him down. There's nothing in it."

"I suppose he was tired," Sulema said. "But that doesn't explain it. He would have had to fall with a lot of force to sink to the bottom."

"Maybe if he fell backwards? The strap caught, he panicked, it pulled tighter . . ." Efraín removed his shirt and boots but left his pants on for modesty in front of the others. He waded to the edge of the pool, turned his back to it, sucked in a long breath, and threw himself backwards at the water. Rose never raised her head.

Efraín popped up. "I didn't get anywhere near the bottom."

Sulema reached out to the drowned man and slipped her fingers gently under the strap. "It's snug. The strap couldn't have drifted around underwater and snagged on the branch."

"Besides, that strap was wrapped around the branch, wound

twice. I don't see how that could happen unless someone—" Efraín stopped.

Catalino nodded. "Remember, Efraín, the river wouldn't let you take the body until you went underwater and saw how the strap was caught on the branch. It made you see that the man was trapped."

Efraín remembered Luke at their house that morning, calm one moment, then sweating and clenching his jaw. Luke couldn't let another shepherd steal his flock. Efraín thought of him pursuing the escapees, too late to catch them but meeting Jason, who was hurrying back for Rose. Given the timing, they would have met near the river crossing, Efraín realized. How easy for tall Luke to grab frail Jason, drag him into the river, and plunge him underwater until he stopped struggling. And how simple for him to disguise the murder with a simple twist of the pack strap on the branch.

Efraín looked at the others: Sulema biting her lip and Catalino turning his palm-leaf hat in his hands. He knew they had seen a similar vision.

"The judge will come for the body," Catalino said. "You know those town people. We try to explain that the river wouldn't let you take the drowned man until you saw that someone had wrapped the strap on the branch, and he'll laugh."

Sulema glanced at Rose, still crouched in misery beside the dead man. "Do you think she saw it happen?"

Efraín wrinkled his brow. "I don't think so . . . when she came to our house crying, she feared Jason was dead, but she wasn't sure."

Sulema agreed. "Yes. And when she was there with Luke earlier, he left in such a hurry to catch the runaways that I doubt if she could keep up. She and the boy probably fell way behind. Luke had time to meet Jason, drown him, and start back before Rose caught up." She thought a moment. "I'll bet he told her that Jason was dead," Sulema added. "Just to hurt her."

Efraín realized why the coati had been killed. "Luke shot that coati, not Jason," he said. "Because it made the people smile. It took their attention away from him."

"You're right." Sulema swept her hair back from her face. "And today he killed Jason for the same reason. But Rose defied him. She ran away and came to us for help."

They gazed at the drowned man lying on the riverbank, and the woman, now empty of tears and silent, sitting beside him.

"What should we do about her?" Efraín asked.

"Take her and the boy back to our house for now," said Sulema. "Make her eat something. Clean them up for their trip to town—"

they'd better go with the judge when he takes the body. I don't know where they'll go then. Surely she has someone, somewhere, who will help her." Sulema looked doubtful.

"I'll stay with the young man until the judge gets here," Catalino offered. "But don't leave yet." He took a chunk of white balsa wood out of his pocket and whittled a few final strokes on it with his jackknife. Efraín leaned closer to see the shape: a fish.

"You always have string, Efraín." Catalino held out his hand.

Efraín rummaged through his pockets and produced two fragments, each a few feet long. Catalino knotted the pieces together and tied the fish to one end. "Excuse me, Epifanio," he told the toddler. "I need that stone now. Watch what I do with it." He wound string around the rock and fastened it to the fish. "That'll weigh it down."

Catalino walked over to the blond boy. Leaning out over the river, he seized the end of the stick and pulled it in enough to tie on the string. Quicker than the eye could see he flung the wooden fish into the river.

The boy had looked away from the water and was staring open-mouthed at Catalino.

"Pull it in, *niño*!" Catalino said. "Feel the weight on that stick? You've caught something!" He mimicked raising a fishing pole.

The boy looked back at the river. Tentatively he lifted the stick, then higher, until the wooden fish popped out of the water. He laughed.

Rose had looked up to watch the boy.

"You go with your mother," Catalino instructed him. He helped the boy to his feet and gave him a light push.

Efraín lifted Epifanio to his shoulders. Sulema reached down and put an arm around Rose. She gently pulled her up and pointed at the trail. Reluctantly the woman took her child by the hand and they all set off.

The foreign woman stumbled once, trying to look over her shoulder at her friend. "He died for you," Efraín told her, hoping she understood. "*Un hombre muy valiente.*"

They were nearly home when a clamor of clucks and squawks resounded through the forest.

"Those chickens aren't cackling just because a hen laid an egg. A hawk's after them!" Sulema started to run.

"Wait! It may not be something after the chickens," Efraín called. Sulema stopped and clapped a hand to her mouth.

The foreigners caught their fear. Rose started to cry again, but silently. They all crept forward and paused at the edge of the yard.

where undergrowth would hide them from anyone in the clearing. Efraín set the toddler on his feet but kept a tight grip on his hand.

Hens, rooster, and chicks were clustered underneath the bench, feathers ruffled, squawking indignantly. "Any missing?" Efraín asked.

Sulema counted. "No."

"A hawk would have scattered feathers, even if it missed its strike. A weasel or a wildcat wouldn't have left without taking a bird."

Sulema gripped Epifanio's other hand. "Someone's been here, someone who doesn't belong. Chickens always know."

They held their breath, trying to see through the cane siding into the house. Then the red rooster stepped out from under the bench, threw his glossy head back, and crowed, reclaiming his kingdom. A fluffy golden hen led her chicks out from shelter and began scratching in the dirt.

"Whoever scared them is gone now," Efraín said. "The rooster says it's safe, and the oldest hen agrees."

They walked to the house. Efraín peered around the doorway into the dimness. Everything looked normal: the hammocks Efraín had woven hung motionless from the ceiling, the big sack of black beans from the last harvest leaned against another wall, Efraín's machete in its tasseled leather case was on its wooden peg, the broom-weed broom rested in a corner of the hard-packed dirt floor.

"Let's keep Rose and boy inside," Efraín said. "It's a foolish man who doesn't pay attention to what his chickens tell him."

Everyone crowded into the hut. Rose sank down in a corner, pulling the little boy close beside her. He held the stick with the wooden fish in one hand. Sunlight coming through the gaps in the cane siding striped their faces with thin white lines.

Sulema settled Epifanio in his small hammock. His eyelids drooped.

Efraín reached high up on the wall to lift down his old rifle, then remembered he had no bullets. Outside, the chickens again squawked in surprise. Efraín handed the machete to Sulema and stepped into the doorway.

Luke stood in the yard. "Where is she?" he demanded, seeing Efraín. The foreigner carried his rifle. He pounded it on the ground. "I know she's here. I found her hair band here by this bench." He waved the red elastic in the air.

From the corner of his eye Efraín saw Rose huddle lower. The little boy squeezed up tight against her. His eyes were wide, staring at the wall in the direction of the tall man's voice. Sulema

stood between them and the door. Efraín prayed that Epifanio was sound asleep and wouldn't cry out.

Luke fired a shot into the air.

Efraín tried to think of what to do. Ask something, anything to distract the man. "I've been wondering, how did you and your friends end up here, so far from your home?" he blurted out.

"Rose. It's all her fault!"

"What do you mean?" Efraín couldn't hide his surprise.

"We were staying with this couple I met in Sedona. At first they were all enthusiastic about my work with the young people. But they lost faith in me . . . like Jason did. It was time to move on but I was out of money. Then out of the blue a lawyer showed up and said that Rose had an inheritance. So I thought we'd head down here and live off the land—my dream. Now it's all fallen apart."

"But how is that her fault?" Efraín asked.

"I couldn't have come here if she hadn't given me the money." A white wasp, the fiercest kind, buzzed over Luke. He swung his hand but missed. The wasp flew to a white hibiscus flower and disappeared against its pale petals. Luke clamped his mouth shut, then opened it wide. "I asked you, where is she?"

"My wife took her to—to the Soto place," Efraín stuttered.

The man balanced the end of the rifle on the ground. "I have to find her, for her own good."

"I'll take you to her. The Soto place isn't far."

Luke's eyes narrowed. "After I look in your house again." He started forward.

"*Buenas tardes.*" Catalino stepped out from behind a queen-of-night bush at one side of the yard. He was breathing hard.

Luke whirled. Efraín hoped Catalino had been there long enough to know what was happening.

"Where is she, old man?" Luke demanded.

"The woman with yellow hair?" Catalino asked calmly. "She's with Efraín's wife, walking toward the Soto place. She's going to borrow a horse from Mr. Soto, to ride to the bus stop. She wants to go home."

"She can't leave! Her home is with me!"

"They were walking fast," Catalino continued. "You'd better hurry if you want to catch up."

The foreigner swung the rifle by its barrel and hit a tree trunk with the butt.

Efraín took a few steps out of the doorway into the yard. "Catalino can show you a shortcut. You'll get there before the women do."

Catalino nodded. "A path through the wilderness that only my

people know. But we have to hurry." He turned his back and walked toward the main trail.

Luke looked indecisively between the hut and Catalino. "You come too." He waved the rifle at Efraín.

The three men walked along the trail, the foreigner behind. "What made you come to our house, Catalino?" Efraín asked his friend in a low voice. "The judge couldn't have arrived this fast."

"No . . . I began to wonder where Luke was, and what he'd be doing. Then I heard the shot." Catalino stopped. He raised his voice. "This is where we go into the *montana salvaje*." He pointed into the shadowed deep forest beside the trail.

The men turned off the trail into the savage wilderness. Enormous trees closed around them. Spongy black soil muffled their steps. A melancholy bird trilled in the distance and the sound reverberated through the heavy air. No sunlight found its way through the thick canopy of the forest. Efraín wasn't sure which direction they were going, but he didn't think it was toward the Soto place.

A perfect butterfly, emerald green veined with velvet black, floated ahead of them. It hovered, drifted, and vanished against a tree trunk mottled green and gray with lichen. An iguana, armored in dark green and charcoal grey like the bark, emerged beyond the tree and lay indolently in their path.

Catalino led them around the iguana. It tilted a glowing amber eye at them as they passed. Its tail quivered.

Luke swore. "There's that owl again. What's the matter with it? Owls don't come out in the daytime."

Efraín looked ahead. A large owl blocked their way. Its brown and gray feathers blended with the forest floor. Beige circles outlined its ocher eyes.

Luke kicked dirt toward the bird. The owl spread its broad wings and took ponderous flight, disappearing into the shadows of a tree fern.

Luke shoved Efraín between the shoulder blades with the flat of his hand. "Hurry."

Efraín looked down in time to step over a heavy-bodied dark snake. A chain of beige crosses ran the length of its body. The serpent raised its lance-shaped head to watch them pass and Efraín saw the small hollows on either side of its face that marked it as a pit viper. Its delicate tongue flicked out and in. The snake slipped under the fallen leaves.

Luke jabbed Catalino with the rifle barrel. The old man stumbled but caught himself. Luke quickened his step. Catalino had to trot to keep from being trampled.

The light dimmed. Efraín looked up. A murky passage opened before them, lined with massive trees and thick tangled vines that coiled upward like serpents. Suddenly a shaft of sun pierced the forest canopy and struck the ground in front of them. A hypnotic pattern of molten gold and ebony filled the pool of light. As Efraín stared, a figure took form: an immense dappled cat slouched in the sun.

Efraín hadn't seen a jaguar in years, since the area grew settled.

It yawned, and Efraín saw that his whole head would fit in the beast's mouth. With careless haughty eyes, the jaguar watched the men. Efraín felt his feet drag as though he walked through thick clay mud.

Catalino saw the animal too, but Luke didn't. He was looking down and muttering to himself.

The sunbeam went out like a snuffed candle. Shadows closed over the cat.

Luke pushed past the two men as though recalling some urgent appointment.

Catalino put a hand on Efraín's shoulder. "You and I go back now," he whispered. Luke plunged forward into the dark tunnel.

Efraín heard breaking branches and muffled words, then nothing. He swallowed. "What's out there?" he asked Catalino as they started back.

"I don't know. I've never been this way before. Now we have to look carefully to find our way back to the trail."

The two friends retraced their steps, guiding themselves with bent ferns and bruised dumb-cane.

As they reached the trail a huge green parrot flew above their heads. It shrieked and whistled as though in triumph. They saw no other living creature on their way home. 🦜



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PAST LIFE

JOHN C. BOLAND

“D”o you believe you’ve lived before, Mr. Dowski?” the young man in the beach hat asked.

Clete Dowski leaned forward. “Believe? That’s too strong a word, son.” He stretched out a Gulf-browned hand, offering a photo of his sister, who lived in Minneapolis and was in splendid health for a woman of seventy-six. “My wife Crissy—this is her before she got sick—she died this spring. Sometimes I get the damndest feeling. You know, like she wants me to find her. Then I read your book telling about our previous lives and how we can sometimes reach loved ones on the other side.”

He let a little hope creep into his voice.

Rory Grover, who sat with his back to the sun, his dark eyes shaded by an umbrella, his plump elbows on the table, his sweaty ankles crossed, stared at the photograph as if it might hold a message.

“I feel something—” he began. “There’s a power here, Mr. Dowski. Powerful love.”

“That’s the kind we had.” Clete bit his lower lip.

“I’m glad you found us, Mr. Dowski. In the coming week, we’ll help you reach Crissy.” Rory Grover extended a big hand. His movements were brisk for a man his size. “Miss Stewart will get you settled.”

The woman beside him, who held a clipboard against her halter top, was a slim blonde whose reflective sunglasses cast back a shrunk view of the world. In high-heeled sandals she towered over Clete as she led the way to a small office a few yards from a swimming pool.

“How did you hear about Atlantis Beach, Mr. Dowski?”

“A neighbor saw Mr. Grover on TV. Then I bought one of his books. A real sweet one, *River of Souls*.”

“I think that’s one of Mr. Grover’s best,” she said. “It inspires us all.”

She signed him in, stamped his bank check covering a week’s residence, and showed him along a covered walkway to the compound’s west quadrant. “There’s a map of the campus in your

room. We have dinner between five and seven thirty, always buffet style, and then an hour for study groups. If you have any questions, just dial 44 and you'll reach my desk."

"Thank you," Clete said.

His room was in a cottage surrounded by tropical gardens. There were tennis courts past the gardens, then a man-made nature pond with tall grasses, osprey roosts, and an elevated observation deck. The osprey could watch the humans, who watched the alligators, who watched back but—one assumed—couldn't climb stairs. He heard twittering in the garden and saw a small aviary full of love birds. If it weren't for the mumbo-jumbo, it would be a relaxing place. Since Atlantis Beach had opened last year, it had drawn a few of Clete's neighbors at the mobile home park twelve miles up the road. Nobody Clete knew had been picked clean. But his best friend, Karen Matthews, had asked him to look in on an old school chum. So here he was, sixty-seven and cranky, resigned to his loneliness, ready to endure a week's worth of hoo-doo. He consulted the menu on the room's writing desk. At least the cuisine wasn't vegan.

The folks around the pool had a bridge game going. Bridge players were a society unto themselves, and nobody looked up from the cards as he passed. On the lawn, a couple swatted a badminton bird back and forth. Clete recognized the woman player—tall and gangling, with a frizzed cap of gray hair—as Karen's friend, Isadora Moss. She was laughing. In the snapshot he had seen two days ago, she had worn the stunned look of someone whose face had been slapped for no good reason. The picture had been taken shortly after her husband's death.

Her companion was small, with tennis whites that set off a year-round tan, sleek white hair, and an intense face. Except for not having horns and a tail, he matched Karen's description of Charlie Ives. He whacked the bird on a high long arc. Isadora flubbed the return, and the bird splashed into a bed of begonias.

"Had enough?" Ives called. When she nodded, he grinned. "You're getting better, Ike."

They collapsed into chairs beside the pool.

"So what's the honeymoon to be?" Ives demanded. "Gawking at Mexican temples or cruising the Leeward Islands?"

Isadora Moss smiled. "I could stand either. My son," she added, "isn't going to like either."

"Good! My daughter isn't going to like her old man getting hitched. Darn shame about that. I vote for cruising. We can drive down to Miami, pick up my boat. By the time we reach

Anguilla, I'll have made a sailor of you."

Nodding solemnly, Isadora Moss patted Ives's hand. "Okay, Charlie."

They got along comfortably for a couple who had known each other only four weeks. Even so, Clete thought, it was hard to believe they'd been lovers ten thousand years ago.

The group exploration that evening began at seven thirty. All eighteen guests showed up to the screened community room, two in wheelchairs. Rory Grover introduced a striking, black-haired woman named Deanne, who said she was half-Seminole and half-Calusa with—a smile—a little Irish around the edges. She dropped swiftly into a trance and announced contact with her spirit guide, whom she introduced as Potomo. Potomo, who had drowned in the Everglades in 1835, would answer questions through her, in her voice.

One of the bridge players popped up. "Ask my husband Ned where he left the insurance policies!"

Deanne's eyelids fluttered. "Potomo, are you in contact with Ned . . . ?"

Clete ducked out the door, crossed to the cottages south of the pool, and slid open the back door to Ives's room. In the five minutes he gave himself, he found nothing that indicated the man was anything but what he claimed, a retired business executive, eccentric and lonely. One of his eccentricities, which Clete admired, was a fondness for fifty-dollar bills. Clete found more than thirty of them nestled between the pages of a book of mystical poems, *Memoirs of Atlantis & Lemuria*, penned by a round-faced lady named Lydia Grover. The book was dedicated to her son Rory. Clete left the money alone. There was more cash tucked between the pages of *River of Souls*. Here Ives had used hundreds.

Reading the book two evenings ago, Clete had chuckled at its karmic argument for reincarnation: If you had suffered in this life, you deserved better the next time around. Fat chance, Clete thought.

Charlie Ives seemed to be doing okay in his present life.

The next morning, Clete hiked a half mile down the Gulf highway to a doughnut shop where Karen Matthews was on her second cup of coffee. She was dressed for retirement rather than the courtroom where she had spent her career. Her plaid shirt had smudges of paint on one sleeve, and the knees of her khaki slacks bore grass and mud stains. She did most of her gardening before her neighbors at the Heron Harbor Mobile Home Park were out

of bed in the morning. Clete liked and admired her. He didn't usually feel that way about lawyers.

"So, Dowski, is Rory Grover a crook?" As Clete sat down, she closed the back pages of the *Financial Times*.

"Probably."

"Is Ives in it with him?"

"Too soon to tell."

She blew through her nose—expressing derision for his slowness, he thought. Not very ladylike.

It occurred to him that Matthews's years before the bar had disposed her to think the worst of people. She was suspicious that Isadora Moss, whom she'd kept in touch with for forty years, had gone batty after her husband Jeff ran his car into a canal near Boynton. She was suspicious that Rory Grover had sicced Ives on Isadora. Either thing was possible. Both were possible. The couple had met at a weekend open house at Atlantis Beach a month ago. Instant chemistry, according to Moss. Instant rapport. Maybe too instant. If Grover vetted his prospective clients, the widow Moss would have made his nose twitch and his tail straighten. Having inherited one of Florida's largest gravel and cement businesses, Isadora had plenty of money and not nearly enough years left to spend it.

Enter a Rory Grover or Charlie Ives to lighten her burden.

Clete described what he'd found in Ives's room. "Has your private detective learned anything?"

Matthews had hired an investigator only two days ago, when Isadora announced she planned to marry. "Ives claims to have money," she responded. "Puts on a decent front. We're tracking bank accounts. I need proof that will convince Isadora that he's a phony. Then hope she's got enough sense to listen." She set down her coffee cup so it clanked. "I'm counting on you, Dowski. Don't let me down."

If he let Karen Matthews down, he would have to hide in his trailer for a month. That meant missing the weekly poker games at Ralph Hopper's. He sighed, looked at the rack of doughnuts on the wall.

"Are you going to buy me a cup of coffee?" he said.

"Tell me more about Grover's operation."

Before he finished, she was angry enough to sue someone—in fact, just about anyone—but she had bought him a doughnut. He walked back to Atlantis Beach, which wasn't—just to show Rory Grover's level of scruples—anywhere near the beach, at least a quarter mile west. Deception everywhere, Clete thought.

Deanne, the Seminole-Calusa-Irish medium, caught him after lunch. "Your wife's name was Christine, wasn't it?"

Clete nodded. His wife's name had been Mary Beth, but that was something he never discussed. Not with anyone. "Mr. Grover told you?"

Deanne had dark blue eyes that met his frankly. "No, Mr. Dowski. I hadn't had a chance to see your file before this morning. Last night, Potomo wanted to introduce me to another spirit. He's been my guide for eight years, and I've never heard him more eager. He said her name was Princess Esne when she lived in the Nile Valley four thousand years ago. But in her most recent life, she was Christine Dowski."

"Crissy," Clete said softly.

The woman smiled and nodded. Leaning forward, bare brown knees close to his, she grabbed his hands. The handsome face radiated hope. "That was when I lost contact last night. But perhaps this evening . . ."

"Yes," Clete murmured.

"If you could tell me more about Esne—I mean Crissy, as you knew her."

"She loved kids, adored them. It hurt that she couldn't have any, but we adopted at least a dozen stray cats."

As Deanne beamed empathy, he pulled a long face at the invented memory. But the subject was too close to him, and for a moment he was angry at Karen Matthews for asking him to do this.

"It's a lovely name, Crissy. Did you notice the euphonic resemblance to Esne?"

"Why, that's right," Clete said.

"It's quite likely, Mr. Dowski, that you knew Esne in another life. We often find that souls have traveled together all along their journey, shedding many forms. For all we know, the journey never ends."

"What a wonderful thought," Clete said. But he felt he knew better.

The afternoon had turned hot. We used to say hotter than hell's hinges, Clete remembered. Nobody said that anymore. The sun had emptied the tennis courts. The high-rises hugged the distant beach, and nothing cast a shadow this way. Above the path, where not a puff of air moved, dry palm fronds hung like racks of silent knives.

If I were running this show, Clete thought, I'd have a few shills working the rich ones. Arrange a marriage or two, followed pretty

soon by a cardiac arrest. Nobody expects old people to live forever. Nobody wants them to.

He stood on the paving stones, feeling the reflected heat grip his legs.

Rory Grover was running a small session, telling a woman in a flowered dress that her long-dead daughter was happy, surrounded by loved ones, on the other side. The woman's creased face was alight, and her eyes were young.

"She talks to your father every evening," Grover said.

The woman gripped his plump arm. "Papa?"

Clete spotted Charlie Ives having a drink near the pool with a pretty young woman. There was a family resemblance. She was compact, graceful, deeply tanned. Her wide, pale peach lips were doing most of the talking. Her honey blond head bobbed like a hammer driving a nail.

Brown legs propped on an adjacent chair, Ives listened with an expression of fond tolerance. As Clete got closer, Ives said, "You're wasting your time, Joyce. Same goes double for your jackass husband."

"How dare you?"

"It's easy. Your old man's not senile. Not sex-starved. But he's getting married tomorrow. You're welcome at the event if you mind your manners. I hope you'll be there, sweetie."

She glared at him.

"I've got a feeling," Ives said, tone gentle, "that it's that no-good you married who put you up to this. You're his meal ticket."

She shot out of her chair and stalked across the terrace. At the door to the office, she shouted inside. "Donny! Come on!"

A tall, bearded young man in a tank shirt and tight shorts stepped outside. Rory Grover was right behind him. Grover smiled at the young woman. "Nice to see you again, Mrs. Prentiss."

"Nice," she mimicked. "You've got my father brainwashed with all this supernatural crap. Now he's going to marry a stranger! Come on, Donny, let's get out of here."

As he passed the table, Clete nodded sympathetically to Charlie Ives, who responded with a tired smile.

From his cottage, he called Karen Matthews. "Ives's daughter put on a show here that suggests she isn't eager for the match up. That sort of works in his favor, doesn't it?"

He described the scene.

"Maybe I'm being too hardnosed," Matthews admitted. "My

detective is supposed to have a report this afternoon. Let's hear what she says."

"Okay."

"You don't mind hanging out there another day or so? It's pretty swank."

"They're going to start telling me about my past lives," Clete said.

"Were you a king or just a prince?"

"Haven't gotten that far." He thought about it. "Probably a gardener."

That evening, as Deanne fell into her trance, Rory Grover spread his chubby arms and asked, "Can you guide any loved ones to us?"

The woman's lips moved. "They are always among you. And oh! This is joyous! Yanis and Theobe are united after eons' separation."

Watching Ives and Isadora Moss, Clete noticed the smile flicker on the man's lips. Moss seemed less attuned to Deanne's spiritual wavelength. She had her hand on Ives's shoulder.

As Potomo described the ancient romance of Yanis and Theobe—who had been reincarnated as Ives and Mrs. Moss—Clete admired the mechanics of the presentation. Grover had dispensed with the standard game of regressing a victim through past lives, which required a subject who was easily hypnotized and malleable. Potomo's guided tours could be scripted in advance.

"Before Atlantis sank, Yanis was a priest and atomic technician," Potomo announced through Deanne. "Knowledge and life both trace a circle. Yanis led the first expedition to Luna, but the colony was destroyed in the early battles with Mars. Both Yanis and Theobe gave up their bodies in that dreadful conflict." As Potomo unwound a tale of science fiction, romance and tragedy, Clete watched Charlie Ives nodding.

After the session, Clete had coffee with Ives and Moss in the community room. He pumped the man gently about how he had come to the resort.

"It was my son-in-law, really. I've been interested in the continuity of life, as we call it, for years. But Donny introduced me to Grover's books. They were a real eye-opener. I'm afraid my daughter isn't too happy with the result. Kids get jealous when a parent remarries." He looked fondly at Isadora Moss.

She cast a calculating glance at Clete. "What about you, Mr. Dowski?"

"It's all pretty new to me," Clete said. "I figured this place would be a good lonely hearts club."

Charlie Ives burst out laughing. "It's sure worked out that way for Ike and me. May you be as lucky, Clete."

He was in his bed, staring at the turning ceiling fan, when Matthews phoned. "Mark this in your diary, Dowski. You're right; I'm wrong. Charles Evans Ives is rich. Not quite as rich as Isadora, but close enough. I'm invited to the wedding tomorrow. You want to be my escort?"

"Do I need a tux?"

"I wouldn't invite you if you did," she said. "Apart from the fact he's not a charlatan, what do you think of Ives?"

"Nice guy, a little kooky." He described Ives's enthusiasm for his past lives.

"You can't have everything."

"No. And I think he's sincere. That's more than a lot of people get when they marry."

"You sound sad," she said in mock sympathy.

"Just too much sun today."

Drinks in hand, Clete and Karen stood at the far end of the swimming pool, wishing the warm evening air would move. Down by the nature pond, where the ceremony was scheduled, torches dispersed the dusk and Miss Stewart, the blond assistant, demonstrated her versatility by playing a flute.

"Debussy?" Clete said, hoping he'd proved his erudition by pronouncing it correctly.

"Bacharach," said Karen, "but you were close."

The bride and the bridegroom came outside, both wearing white, and Rory Grover clapped Ives on the shoulder. "When couples rejoin-like this, it reaffirms all my work," he said.

As Grover hurried down to the pond, Clete shook Ives's hand. "Did your daughter make it?"

"Oh yes. Her tantrums don't last long. The only one boycotting is Ike's son. I'm sorry about that. I'd like to meet him, explain just how it is with us."

"I tried," Isadora Moss said. "My son thinks I'm bonkers. I'm glad one of my oldest friends could be here." She touched Karen's arm. "There's probably another way of phrasing that."

"Most elderly friend?" Karen suggested.

Isadora Moss laughed. "And your friend, Mr. Dowski. You didn't have to send him up here to watch out for me, you know."

"Yes, I did."

"So are you two an item?"

Karen Matthews shook her head. "When we figure that out, I'll tell you."

"I'm going to circulate," Ives said, and they both drifted off.

Karen looked after them. "I still think she's crazy getting married so soon."

"Love crazy," Clete said. He meant it lightly but couldn't summon a grin. He wondered if he hadn't seen a movie by that name. *Love Crazy*. Tom Hanks, maybe, or . . . He scowled. It bothered him when his thoughts wandered. They always took the path of least resistance, which was usually the path least useful to understanding anything.

"People do worse things," he said.

Deanne came out of the office a few minutes later, resplendent in a low-cut dress. Karen Matthews managed to corner her and introduce herself. "I'm a friend of Mrs. Moss," she said. "It's my personal opinion that you and Rory Grover are a pair of cheap hustlers."

Deanne lifted handsome eyebrows. "I've been a spiritualist since I was seventeen, Ms. Matthews. That's sixteen years, if you're interested. It would be a long time to practice something you don't believe in." Her glance moved to Clete. "Am I right that you're not looking for your long-lost wife?"

"You're right."

"You seemed so sincere about Crissy."

"There never was a Crissy."

Deanne looked him straight in the eye. "Then I wonder who Esne belonged to?"

She headed down to the nature pond.

After a while, Clete and Karen went after her. Karen grinned. "Never was a Crissy, huh?"

"Not in this lifetime," Clete insisted.

A young man with a recorder joined Miss Stewart in striking up a piping version of the wedding march. Clete counted heads. All the resort's guests and a few staff members had turned out. Ives's daughter Joyce Prentiss and her bearded husband stood stiff and unsmiling, as if they weren't so much gaining a stepmother as losing an income. Clete doubted that Charlie would cut them off. Apart from his belief in Grover's voodoo, he seemed like a pretty sensible guy. He'd latched onto a woman who seemed to adore him. They were going into it like adults. Both had had their lawyers draft prenups. That news had set Karen back on her heels.

until Isadora explained gently, "I want to marry Charlie, darling, not have his lungs ripped out in court."

"Thanks, I guess," Karen Matthews said.

Clete tried to guess the affiliation of the small bald man in clerical collar and white shorts who was going to perform the ceremony. The way he and Grover had their heads together as they came across the lawn, it could be the First Church of Lemuria. Isadora Moss followed, holding a small bouquet. They were all there, when somebody made the mistake of asking where the bridegroom had gotten to.

A woman from the other night's séance was the first who looked into the swimming pool. She screamed.

Clete crossed the pool apron and saw him. Like an underwater swimmer who had paused, the shape lay on the bottom, white-jacketed arms spread, hair transparent in the underwater light.

Clete shucked off his shoes and jacket and dived in.

Long before they had gotten Charlie Ives onto the tile apron, Clete knew it was a waste of time. He stood shivering in the humid night while Miss Stewart, who said she had had lifesaving training, tried for ten minutes to get the lungs breathing and the heart beating. Finally, one of the men surrendered a jacket, which Rory Grover laid across Ives's face.

Joyce Prentiss stared at her dead father, gripping her husband's arm.

As a tall lean sheriff's deputy walked up from the nature pond, Clete Dowski muttered juicy curses. He was standing alone, jacket over his shoulders, amazed how long clothes could stay wet when it was this hot. Karen Matthews had taken Isadora Moss inside. Joyce Prentiss had resisted her husband's arm tugs and had pulled a chair over poolside to sit beside her father. Deanne, looking more dark Irish than Seminole or Calusa, had disappeared between the buildings before the rescue truck and the deputies arrived.

"Daddy couldn't swim," Joyce Prentiss told one of the paramedics. "I always worried he would fall off his boat."

The tall deputy, whose name was Floyd, asked if her father had called for help.

"We didn't hear anything," said her husband. "But everyone was down at the pond."

The deputy turned to the white-haired woman who had spotted Ives in the pool. "Why'd you check the swimming pool, ma'am?"

"Because I live in Florida, you dummy," she snapped. "People are always stumbling into them, especially toddlers and drunks."

"Had Mr. Ives been drinking?"

"There was champagne for after the ceremony," his daughter said. "Daddy didn't drink much."

The deputy talked for a while to Clete and Karen, got their names and addresses in case further interviews were necessary. He seemed willing to accept Ives's death as an accident. Working his memory for what he'd seen, whom he'd seen at the nature pond, and when, Clete couldn't disagree. But after a minute, he followed Deputy Floyd into the office with a suggestion.

"What do you make of it?" Karen Matthews asked him. They were sitting on the patio of her double-wide trailer at Heron Harbor, drinking Dixie beer and listening to the frogs rattle the darkness. Matthews had insisted that Isadora Moss come up to the trailer park to stay until her son could fly down from New Jersey. Left alone moving Isadora's rental car, Clete hadn't been able to talk to either woman. As soon as the convoy reached the trailer park, Isadora had taken a prescription medication and retired to the guest bedroom.

Clete thought about his friend's question. What did he make of it all? "I didn't like the way that phony medium, Deanne, lit out of there," he replied. "The deputies couldn't find her. Miss Stewart said Deanne's car was gone."

Karen Matthews stretched her legs. "I could think of a number of reasons someone like Deanne would vanish before the police show up."

"Sure. Her spirit guide told her to get out of town."

"In which case, he would be a useful spirit. I wonder how many states she's lived in, under how many names."

"You're a cynic."

"Perhaps. For what it's worth, I don't think she's thirty-three as she told us. A few winters past forty would be closer."

"Still nicely put together," Clete said. "And I don't think she pushed Charlie into the swimming pool. How would she know he couldn't swim? Spirit guide?"

"You're naïve, Dowski. A good con artist knows how to interview people. Ives could have told her so himself. But there's still the problem of motive."

"So you think it was an accident?"

"I didn't say that."

"You think he was murdered?"

"I didn't say that either. Joyce Prentiss and her husband might think they had a motive. Even with Ives's assets protected by a

prenup, their influence on him would be diluted. Isadora's opinions would count. They might not be able to stand that."

Clete nodded. "Charlie said something to Joyce about her husband seeing her as a meal ticket."

"What's the husband's name?"

"Donny Prentiss."

"What does he do?"

"Charlie said he's a musician."

"I should have guessed that from the beard."

"Baseball players have beards today, in case you hadn't noticed."

Karen set down her beer bottle. "Okay, Donny Prentiss needs his income. He's worried Isadora will interfere, so he gives Ives a discreet push into the pool. One problem. Donny and his wife were down at the nature pond when we arrived."

"Maybe he paid Deanne to do the pushing. Was she with us?" Clete scratched his head. "I've lost track who was where."

"I'm sure Deputy Floyd sorted that out," Karen Matthews said. For the first time in hours, she smiled. "He seems capable."

Thinking of the tall, lean deputy, Clete said, "And nicely put together?"

"That too," she admitted.

In the morning Clete crossed the road to Karen Matthews's trailer. Isadora Moss and Karen were sitting at the patio table, drinking coffee. The gangly, grayhaired woman still looked stunned and red eyed as she lifted a tentative smile to Clete. He remembered her bruised look in the photograph Karen had showed him. After a while, people started apologizing for being hurt. Their eyes said I'm sorry, did I do something wrong? He felt terrible for her but couldn't think of anything he could do or say.

"Well, if Dowski's finally out of bed, we can get rolling," Karen Matthews said. "You don't mind being alone this morning, honey?"

Isadora Moss shook her head and yawned. "I'll read the newspaper and maybe take a nap. What are you going to do?"

"Dowski has a dentist's appointment," Karen said, "and he gets sleepy from the painkiller."

They had agreed last night there was no need for Isadora to have to consider the possibility her fiancé had been murdered.

Deputy Floyd had turned matters over to a detective in the Sheriff's Department. The detective, Clete decided, wasn't put together well enough for Karen to notice. Leon Bulmer wasn't fat, and he probably wasn't stupid, but his rumpled slouch and droop-

ing bottom lip didn't inspire confidence. In fact, he was only fifteen pounds overweight and was sleepy from a night sitting up with his thirteen-month-old son. The boy was a late arrival. His daughters were grown. He had turned fifty-four in September. He told Clete and Karen this while rubbing his eyes and palming around his desk for the Charles Ives file.

"You know there was a composer by that name," he remarked. He whistled a few notes of something.

Bulmer opened the file. "Neither of you were friends with the deceased? That's good. I hate talking to survivors. They figure people they liked should live forever. I see you both gave statements last night. So what's new?"

"Have you turned up the medium, Deanne?"

"No, we haven't. Since we're classifying Mr. Ives's death as an accident pending an autopsy report, we probably haven't tried too hard. Deanne Hargrove, according to her employer's records. Lives on Calusa Highway. Hmm."

"How old?" Karen asked.

"Forty-three, it says here."

She shot Clete a superior look. "Has she ever been arrested?"

"Not that anyone's told us." Bulmer frowned over the top of the folder. "You know something about her you're not telling me?"

"She's a crook," Karen Matthews said.

"Gee, a spiritual medium working for a guy who peddles reincarnation, and you say that?"

Clete spoke. "The guy she works for, Rory Grover, stinks like an alligator's underpants."

Bulmer sighed. "So you don't like Deanne Hargrove, and you don't like Rory Grover. What do they have to do with Mr. Ives's death?"

"Grover's running a scam," Clete said. "Suppose he's running something else besides? You get tired of grandpa, take him to Atlantis Beach. Grover and Deanne stage an accident. You know Charlie's daughter is inheriting a lot of money? Maybe Atlantis Beach gets a cut of the estate."

Bulmer rubbed a hand over his mouth, hiding a yawn. He raised his left eyebrow at Clete. "Deputy Floyd said someone was trying to stir up trouble last night, insinuating the son-in-law might have had a hand in Ives's death."

"I pointed out that his daughter wasn't crazy about the marriage."

"That's a pretty common situation. It doesn't add up to murder." He scowled across the top of the file. "Don't you folks have something else to do with your time?"

"Not much," Clete admitted. "We're retired."

"Detective Bulmer is a testy s.o.b.," Clete muttered as they crossed the Sheriff's Department parking lot to Matthews's car.

"He's afraid our brilliance will show him up," Karen said. "But he's basically right. We've got theories but no proof. You know, there's something else you saw that could explain a murder."

"What's that?"

"Charlie Ives had a lot of money in his room. How much would you guess?"

"Five thousand, maybe ten."

"People get offed for less. That's one way of looking at it. Another—Ives had an accident, but Deanne had stolen his money so she decided to run."

Trying to think where the dark-haired medium could have hid five or ten thousand in that dress, Clete nodded without conviction. "We don't actually know she ran," he pointed out. "She just left suddenly last night. Maybe she was upset at Charlie's death."

"That would be her defense," Karen said. "But if she believes in multiple lives, why would she be upset. Charlie had just returned to the cosmic bubble or whatever, pending his next incarnation."

"Okay, let's say she had ten grand tucked in her garter belt."

"You're dating yourself," Karen said.

"That's because I'm good company," Clete replied. "Why don't we ask her?"

Rory Grover didn't receive them warmly. "I hate false pretenses," the big man complained, poking a thick finger at Clete. "You've drained everyone's karmic energy. Deanne's guide was totally upset when she told him there was no Crissy."

"I would think a spirit guide would be more stoic," Karen said. "We're here to see Deanne."

"You can't. She's home sick. And I don't want you on the property."

Karen gave him a lawyerly smile, which was mostly teeth. "Mr. Dowski has paid for a week's residence. You don't want to indulge in outright fraud, do you, Mr. Grover? Though I wouldn't give you many points for subtlety with this Atlantis rigmarole."

"It's not rigmarole!" Grover exploded. "Some people believe! And they're happier for it. Do you really enjoy knowing that when your life ends, that's all there is? That when your husband loses his body, there's nothing left, this wonderful person is gone, completely, forever? What about if it's your child? I couldn't live

like that. My mother wrote poetry. She crossed over eleven years ago. I talk with her every night. We comfort each other."

Karen opened her mouth, then closed it.

Clete made a point of looking around. "You seem to be doing okay in this world, Rory. It must cost a bundle to run this place, never mind paying the spirit guides. The police are gonna want to know where it all comes from. A bequest now and then? A payoff when an old man falls in the pool?"

Rory grabbed for Clete's shirt. Matthews got between them, and the big man backed away.

"Get out of here!" He spun around and screamed toward the office. "Miss Stewart! Miss Stewart! Call the police!"

Karen Matthews grinned at Clete. "I owe you one. With that stuff about his mother, he had me for a moment."

They stopped when they saw the Sheriff's Department vehicle parked behind Matthews's car.

"Grover gets fast service," Clete commented. It had taken them less than a minute to reach Atlantis Beach's parking lot.

Leon Bulmer levered himself out of the official car. The detective waddled toward them, shaking his head. "What are you two doing?"

"Investigating your case," Clete said.

"I don't have a case. Just an accidental drowning."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"I decided maybe somebody should interview the Hargrove woman."

"Good luck. She's not in. But I'll tell you something. When Charlie Ives invited me into his suite the other night, I saw fifty-and hundred-dollar bills stuffed in various books. Several thousand dollars worth. If someone else knew about the money, you might have a murder."

"Why?"

"Maybe someone took the money, and Charlie suspected who."

"But you don't know any money's missing," Bulmer pointed out. He went back to shaking his head. "I really hate amateur detectives."

"It's simple enough," Karen Matthews said. "When the sheriff's deputies went through Mr. Ives's effects, did they find a lot of cash?" When Bulmer didn't answer, she said, "Is it possible they didn't look?"

"Ah, for cripes sake," Bulmer muttered. "Are you saying the Hargrove woman stole it?"

Clete shrugged. "I'm just saying I saw it."

Bulmer pulled a telephone from his jacket. He checked a note-

book, punched a number, listened, cursed. "Damn answering machines. How much money, Mr. Dowski?"

"I didn't count it. Five thousand or more."

"Okay," Bulmer said. "Let's start by finding out if it's missing. And if you're yanking my chain, I'm gonna throw you in jail."

Joyce and Donny Prentiss lived at The Castaways, a gated development built right up to the sand dunes along the Gulf. Tall palms grew thick on the lots, as if there hadn't been a strong wind in a hundred years. When the sheriff's car got closer, the houses blocked Clete's view of the water.

Donny Prentiss answered the door wearing a terry robe, swimming trunks, and sandals. The noise that spilled out of the house made Clete think of bathtubs crashing down stairs. He guessed it was music.

The policeman had to shout to introduce himself. "Mr. Dowski visited your father-in-law's room at Atlantis and says he saw a couple of books stuffed with money. Did you or your wife find any cash when you brought Mr. Ives's effects home?"

Prentiss threw a calculating glance at Clete, then chuckled. "Yeah, it was just like the old boy. Using hundreds as bookmarks." "A few thousand dollars worth?"

"Joyce said it was like seven or eight. He'd been dotty for a long time."

"How is Mrs. Prentiss?"

"Broken up. She went shopping." Prentiss grinned. "I gotta get back to my workout."

As they walked back to the official car, Clete said, "They've been living pretty good off the old man. Probably didn't want to lose it."

"Give it a rest," Bulmer said.

"For that matter, how much do you think it takes to run Atlantis Beach?"

"A million or two a year," Bulmer guessed. "So what? He does a good business, probably gets remembered in a bunch of the suckers' wills. I'll drop you at your car. Why don't you go home. Give detecting a rest. Do something useful. Take a nap." Bulmer yawned at the thought:

Instead, they drove to a pancake house for lunch.

"Something still bothers me," Karen said. "If Deanne Hargrove didn't have Charlie's money, why did she clear out so fast? And why isn't she at work today?"

"Maybe she's wanted by the police somewhere."

"That's what I was thinking last night. But a person in her business learns to brazen it out. There was no reason for the deputies to pay special attention to Deanne. She invited attention by leaving."

"Well, she didn't have Charlie's money." Clete thought about it. "So Prentiss says. We don't know that Donny Prentiss hadn't given her money. Though I really don't see her as a hired killer."

"Can't stop thinking about that garter belt, can you?"

"You put it that way, maybe I could see her as a hired killer." He tried the mental picture, let his mind drift. It was easier than figuring out Rory Grover. He had no doubt Grover was a con man. Yet he seemed sincere. Were those two things mutually exclusive?

"Why don't we go give Deanne the third degree?" Clete suggested. A picture of *that* swam invitingly in his mind.

"Or just ask if she pushed Charlie in the swimming pool," Karen replied.

She found a D. Hargrove listed on Calusa Highway, and her car's GPS system directed them east, not much more than a mile from Atlantis Beach. The sprawl along the highway reminded Matthews of the densely populated suburban areas around Washington, D.C., except here the shopping plazas had names like Periwinkle Square and an ibis sat atop a slowly turning bank sign, so motionless it could have been made of plastic.

As she parked outside one of the garden apartment buildings, Dowski tapped her hand. "Now that's interesting." He pointed through the tinted side window at a tall blond woman climbing out of a sports car. "Miss Stewart. Grover's assistant."

They got out of the car quickly and intercepted Miss Stewart on a path between buildings. She was startled. "Mr. Dowski! You certainly got people upset at our office. Mr. Grover's in orbit."

"Imagine how Mrs. Moss feels," Karen said sweetly.

"Yeah, last night was terrible. Deanne was freaked. She loves being a matchmaker. Are you coming to see her?"

Nodding, Karen said, "We thought she might know something to comfort Isadora."

Miss Stewart beamed. "It's a little early to contact Mr. Ives on the other side—spirits need time to get settled. But why don't we ask her?"

"Do you visit her often?"

"We hang out, now that she's not seeing anyone. She and Mr. Grover used to—you know. And I feed Deanne's cat when she visits her family." As Miss Stewart reached for the doorbell, Clete noticed a big white envelope protruding from her purse. When the door opened, he forgot about the envelope. Deanne was wear-

ing a thin tank top and snug white shorts. He knew the sight would stay with him a while. As long as he could remember anything, he would remember this.

"Hi, Dee, look who I ran into," Miss Stewart said.

Deanne gave Clete a look that would have withered a lesser man. "Mr. Crapowski and the Wicked Witch of the North. What do you two want?"

"Just a little talk," Karen said.

"We've got nothing to talk about."

"If we leave, you'll be talking to Detective Bulmer."

Clete looked past the tank top and saw several pieces of luggage on the floor. He cleared his throat. "Planning a trip?"

Before Deanne could answer, Miss Stewart said cheerfully, "I brought your vacation pay from Mr. Grover," and pulled the envelope from her purse. Clete made a grab, caught the flap, and currency spilled onto the doorstep. Deanne dived for the loose bills, and then yelped as Karen brought a foot down hard on a pile of hundreds.

Staring in disbelief, Miss Stewart said, "Dee, where did all that come from?"

There had to be twenty or thirty thousand dollars.

"Blood money," Karen said. "Prentiss paid Deanne and Grover to kill Ives. This is her cut."

"You're out of your mind," Deanne said. She ripped a few hundreds from under Karen's shoe. "I didn't hurt Charlie. I liked him."

"Then where's the money from?" Karen demanded. "Your 401(k)?"

"It's money Rory owes me."

"Try again."

"I don't have to try again. It's my money." Deanne pushed Karen back and collected the rest of the cash. She told her blond friend, "It's been great, honey, but you really gotta learn to keep your mouth shut." Backing into the apartment, she slammed the door.

Miss Stewart shook her head. "I really don't understand. Mr. Grover wouldn't do anything like what you said. He really loves helping people."

"Hmpf," said Karen.

"And he doesn't need money, he's rich. Half the people at Atlantis Beach don't even pay."

"The man's a saint." Karen Matthews's tone was derisive, but she didn't sound certain. "Deanne isn't rich."

"Boy, she is now, almost. When she asked me to get that envelope from the pool room, I had no idea!"

"From the pool room?"

"Where the pump is."

"Deanne asked you to get it? Mr. Grover didn't?"

Miss Stewart hemmed. "Now that you mention it . . ."

"Now we know why she left fast last night," Clete said. "She couldn't be caught with the dough. But I still don't see her as a murderer."

"Do you consider yourself a good judge of women?" Karen Matthews asked.

"Not particularly."

"Well then, I'm calling Detective Bulmer. He can't ignore this."

"I'm getting tired of you folks," Leon Bulmer said, looking particularly hard at Karen Matthews. "You remind me of an aunt I had. According to her I couldn't do anything right."

"She must have been an astute woman," Karen said. "It took you forty minutes to get here."

"She was a pain in the glutes. Listen, I'll do the talking to the Hargrove woman. You stay here." He lumbered across the parking area—like a walrus in seersucker, Karen thought—and hammered on the apartment door. When there was no answer for a minute, Clete sauntered around the building. It was a garden apartment, and there was a back door, which opened suddenly as a tall, thin, bearded man hurtled out. As a guayabera shirt flashed past, Clete grabbed. For a moment, he thought he was going to be lifted along like the tail of a kite. Then Bulmer shouted, Donny Prentiss tried to look at the same time he ran, and his feet tangled. They landed on asphalt with the young musician on the bottom.

Clete got up, and Bulmer hauled Prentiss to his feet. In the waistband of his trousers was a narrow leather pouch.

"What are you running for?" Bulmer demanded.

Prentiss opened his mouth.

"What are you doing here?" Clete demanded. "Paying her off twice?"

Catching Prentiss's furtive glance at his waist, Bulmer pulled out the leather pouch. It was a bank bag. "What's in here?"

Clete had never thought he would get tired of looking at hundred-dollar bills.

Bulmer gave Donny Prentiss a shake. "Your hand's bloody. Did you cut it?"

"She's in there," Prentiss croaked. "But I didn't do it!"

They were sitting in a side room in the Sheriff's Department, where the only magazines seemed to be about boats and shotguns.

Clete was annoyed. He had caught a murderer forty years his junior—had almost tackled him, when you came down to it, and had Leon Bulmer congratulated him?

"Detective Bulmer doesn't want us doing his job for him," Karen said.

"That's tough because I've got his case cracked. Prentiss pays Deanne to dump Charlie into the pool. That makes her dangerous to him. Today, he slips in the back door to retrieve his money and kills her. Very neat."

Detective Bulmer stepped in as Clete finished.

"You've got it all wrapped up," he said with mock praise. "Did I tell you I hate amateur detectives? We sent Prentiss home with his lawyer. He's talking lawsuits for rough handling."

Clete didn't quite splutter. "You let him go?"

"He won't go anywhere."

"But the woman—"

"Deanne Hargrove was beaten to a pulp with a lamp. If Prentiss had done it, he'd have been covered with blood. He got a little blood on his hand checking her pulse."

"But he took her money!"

Bulmer shook his head. "No, he didn't. There's twenty-five thousand dollars in an envelope in Hargrove's suitcase. That's the money you saw. Prentiss admits he gave it to her early yesterday."

"To kill Charlie Ives!"

"Wrong again. He bribed Deanne Hargrove to do something unusual: to tell Ives the truth. She was supposed to tell Ives that all the mumbo jumbo was fake, there wasn't any Yanis and whoever."

"Yanis and Theobe," Karen said.

"Yeah, from their past lives. Prentiss thought if she admitted that, his father-in-law might not be so eager to get married."

"So what was he doing there today?"

"Hargrove called this morning and said she wanted another ten thousand to salve her conscience. Nice girl." Bulmer grinned. "Let me tell you what I'm thinking right now. So you'll *stay out of the way*. I'm going to take a hard look at Rory Grover. He and Hargrove used to be an item. According to the Stewart chick, Deanne dumped him. So he's not happy about that, maybe he goes over and clobbers her with a lamp. I don't want either of you within ten miles of Grover. You understand?"

"We understand," Karen said meekly.

They got back to Heron Harbor in the late afternoon. Isadora's rental car hadn't budged. The woman was moping around the trailer, still in pajamas. Her son was due to arrive that evening

from New Jersey. Grimacing, she said, "He and his wife want me to come up and stay with them. Can you imagine?"

Karen brought three cold Dixies out from the kitchen. The screened patio was shaded but hot.

"When they call me an old fool, I'll have to agree," Isadora said.

"I don't think you're a fool," Clete replied. "You made a good choice in Charlie. He was a nice man."

The tall woman shrugged.

"What went wrong?"

Isadora Moss's stare was blank, not contrived but empty. "What?"

"I think I know what happened. Deanne told Charlie there was no Yanis and Theobe—that it was a hoax. How did he react?"

Mouth gaping in astonishment, Isadora pleaded, "Karen—"

"Dowski!" Matthews snapped.

Clete ignored her. "I kept going over it, and Isadora was the last person who came down to the nature pond from the swimming pool. She had opportunity. The question is whether she had a motive. She hasn't answered my question. When Charlie found out you two weren't Yanis and Theobe, what did he do?"

The mask of innocence trembled. "He decided to call it off."

"And you couldn't stand that."

"I loved him as Charlie. I thought he loved me!" She stepped closer, wanting him to understand. "But he'd ruined everything."

"So knowing he couldn't swim, you pushed him into the pool, left him to drown, and walked down to the nature pond clutching your bouquet. Isn't that right?"

Isadora Moss looked to her old friend from wounded eyes.

"And this morning," Clete went on, "you worried that Deanne knew too much. She knew what she'd said to Charlie. She might have known what his decision was. So you drove down to her apartment and murdered her. That one was in cold blood."

Isadora Moss shook her head. "No, no! She called me on my cell, demanding money. I thought it was cruel of her, breaking up a romance. I didn't know she'd been paid. So I went up, and she was so mean! Sneering at me, saying my family would have me put away!" Her face tightened. "She deserved what she got."

Karen Matthews hadn't touched her beer. None of them had. She watched Isadora with a detachment Clete had seen before. "The sheriff's detective believes Charlie had an accident. You had nothing to worry about."

"I didn't know that." Isadora Moss reached into her pajama pocket. She pulled out a small gun. Clete wondered for a moment where she got it, but only for a moment. Anyone could get a gun

in Florida. Then he wondered what loony thing she planned to do with it. Isadora looked at them with regret. "I have a lot of money, and I want to enjoy it. It would have been ideal with Charlie. Maybe I'll find somebody else."

Clete looked calmly at Karen Matthews. "I told you she was crazy."

Her glance strayed to the screened doorway, where she saw Detective Bulmer standing in the shade. Clete grinned at him as he would at an invited guest, said, "Hey there," and when Isadora turned he grabbed her wrist and forced the gun down.

"That could be your defense, honey," Karen told Isadora. "Crazy with disappointment, crazy with grief. But I don't want to be your lawyer."

"You couldn't anyway," Bulmer said gruffly, opening handcuffs. "You and Mr. Dowski are witnesses."

Karen Matthews walked her friend out to the police car, then came back and lifted her bottle of beer. Clete Dowski wore a smug smile that she found annoying, and she knew how to wipe it away. They had been friends almost a year, but there was a lot she didn't know about him. The gaps in her knowledge rankled.

"So Dowski, there was never a Crissy," she said. "I know you were married. Tell me about her."

Meeting her stare, Clete shook his head. "That was another life," he said.

SOLUTION TO THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

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From "The Burden of Pity," AHMM, December, 2004

—Ann Woodward

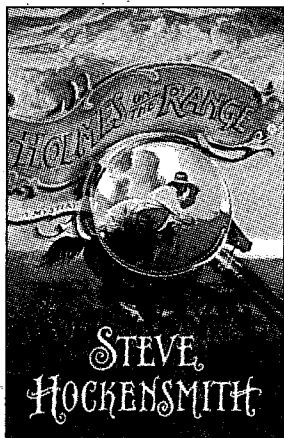
He thanked her simply; she was used to being thanked for listening. Her problem now was to try to prevent a killing.

BOOKED & PRINTED

ROBERT C. HAHN

Though it has its conventions, the mystery genre offers canvasses for stories as broad as any other kind of fiction. This month's books, for instance, take the reader from the ancient world to the American West to that most Hitchcockian of iconic locales, Mount Rushmore.

Steve Hockensmith, a columnist for this magazine and a frequent short story contributor as well, gives a novel-length treatment to a delightfully novel concept—an illiterate cowboy is inspired by Arthur Conan Doyle's tales of Sherlock Holmes to emulate the great detective in **HOLMES ON THE RANGE** (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$22.95). Hockensmith's debut novel combines the tall tales of the American West, the deductive acumen of Sherlock Holmes, and a vernacular as colorful as Mark Twain's to spin a yarn about brothers Big Red and Old Red.



Those are the names by which Otto Amlingmeyer (Big Red) and his older brother, Gustav Amlingmeyer (Old Red) are known to their cowboy comrades. The brothers are the only two surviving members of their family and aside from the book-learning that makes Big Red literate, everything else he knows he learned from his older brother.

Inspired by Big Red's recitation of Holmes's deductions in the story "The Red-Headed League," Old Red allows as how he knew *how* to look at things and "really see 'em." He also begins to practice Holmes's techniques of observation, and that leads the Montana cowboys into their adventures at the odd and perilous Cantlemere Ranch, also known as the Bar VR ranch.

The boys throw in their lot with fellows called Tall John, Pinky, Swivel-Eye, Crazymouth, and Anytime as new hands for the grand sum of five dollars a week. Rough foremen and rough

living conditions are normal, but the Bar VR is unlike any ranch the men have ever seen.

Take an "accidental" death, the surprising arrival of the English owners and their entourage, and rumors of the presence of the notorious cannibal "Hungry Bob" Tracy and soon the brothers have not only a real mystery on their hands but a situation in which their survival hinges on Old Red's ability to prove his observational and detective skills.

Hockensmith spins a fine tale laced with humor and graced with the same spirit of observation and deduction that characterized the original as his rustic counterparts of Holmes and Watson tackle frontier crime.

David Lozell Martin, author of such varied and imaginative novels as *The Crying Heart Tattoo* and *Bring Me Children*, delivers another offbeat but superlative story in *FACING RUSHMORE* (Simon & Schuster, \$23). Martin offers an unsparing indictment of the United States's treatment of Native Americans past and present, but does it with a satirical wit and charm.

FBI agent Charlie Hart is out of his depth when he interrogates Native American protestor John Brown Dog, a "ghost dancer," after the St. Louis Gateway Arch is vandalized and Mount Rushmore is threatened. But a wildly comic and inventive adventure unfolds when the ghost dancer, a woman known as "God's Whore," and an Indian known as the Grandfather lead Hart on a journey that begins at a symbol of American imperialism and ends with a United States brought to a state of increasing desperation. The satire is brilliant and effective, and Martin effectively adopts a perspective that allows him to turn American history upside down.

Matthew Reilly's thriller *SEVEN DEADLY WONDERS* (Simon & Schuster, \$23) pays homage to the greatest and cleverest architects and builders of the ancient world in an adventure-filled novel that is almost cartoonish in the way the *bad guys* are pit against the *good guys* and their incredible escapes from fiendishly ingenious traps.


But this Australian author is not averse to political chances as well, as nations and political groups (including an Islamic terrorist cell) embark on an international search for the seven pieces that form the great Capstone that was placed atop the Great Pyramid of Giza in ancient times. Taken apart by Alexander the Great, dispersed, hidden, and guarded heavily, the seven pieces must be found and reassembled in time for the solar event known as the Tartarus Rotation. Whoever assembles the Capstone pieces in time will have power for the next one thou-

sand years, hence the involvement of so many nations and superpowers. At the center of the story is Australian Jack West, who leads a team of smaller nations who wish to prevent any one nation or group from securing absolute power.

The teams encounter underwater traps, quicksand, volcanic flows, crocodiles, rolling stones, snakes—you name it—and those are just the obstacles created by the ancients. The Americans and Europeans have all the forces of modern and futuristic warfare at their disposal and have sent their best and most ruthless warriors to stop West and his team.

The pieces of the Capstone are hidden among (or associated with) the marvels known as the Seven Wonders of the World. From the Hanging Gardens of Babylon to the Colossus of Rhodes to the Lighthouse at Alexandria, Reilly beautifully recounts their history, or what's known of it, embroidering their fate to fit his story.

The action is almost nonstop and this entertainingly told adventure story could easily morph into an animated film, or a video game, or a feature film filled with special effects.



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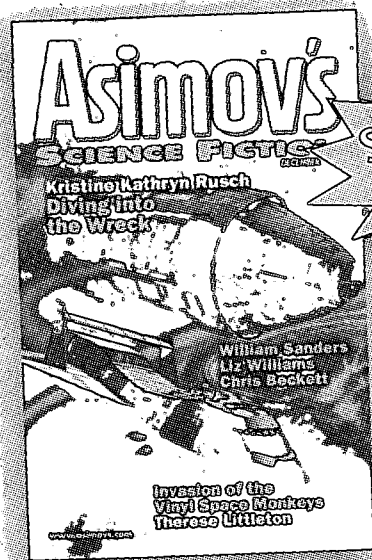
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THE CASANOVA CAPER

BEVERLE GRAVES MYERS

"Do I have the honor of addressing Signor Ziani?"

I looked up from my grimy news-sheet. I'd just settled in to peruse Venice's latest happenings and scandals, but the journalist's overwrought scribblings could wait. It wasn't every day that a dandy in an embroidered silk coat and an elaborately curled wig paraded into Sperazzi's Coffeehouse. The shabby but comfortable establishment where I conducted business generally attracted a much seedier clientele, mainly advocates who scraped a living from the Republic's convoluted legal system.

"I am Nicco Ziani." Since my ancestors included a doge and several senators, I was entitled to the "Signor," but in my reduced circumstances, the title seemed awkward, if not outright embarrassing.

"Ah, at last. I've searched every tavern and coffeehouse from the Piazza to the Rialto. So tiresome." He fanned his moist, fleshy cheeks with a lace-edged handkerchief. "I'm told your services are for hire."

I forced myself to smile. If business was in the offing, I must make myself agreeable. Since I had joined the ranks of the Barnabotti, that pathetic lot of ruined noblemen who take cheap lodgings in the parish of San Barnaba, I had sought to improve my situation by performing small services for the anxious and desperate. Clients had been sparse of late, but at least my sporadic fees kept my landlady at bay.

"Who has need of my services?" I asked.

"You must excuse my shocking lack of manners, Signore. I am really quite distraught." Twisting his gracefully arched lips into a pout, he swept keen, dark eyes over my face and form. "I am Giacomo Casanova."

Excited whispers flew from table to table. So this was the rogue all Venice was gossiping about. Leading the life of a gentleman without title or obvious income, Casanova was famous for two things: befriending wealthy men and seducing any woman who



caught his fancy. Noble ladies and actresses seemed equally susceptible to his flattery. At present, Casanova was rumored to be living off the generosity of an amiable aristocrat named Matteo Broschi.

"I have a job for you," the dark, heavy-jowled man continued. "I assure you I can pay well."

I glanced around the coffeehouse. Three waiters hovered with steaming cups of coffee, and twenty pairs of ears flapped almost hard enough to lift my neighbors' backsides from their benches. I suggested a stroll on the *campo*.

The quiet, shop-lined square basked in the welcome warmth of the October sun. Across an azure sky, a dry, steady breeze shredded the clouds into ragged wisps. Casanova and I paced the perimeter of the *campo*, keeping well away from the idlers lounging on the steps of the central well.

"Do you follow the opera, Signor Ziani?"

I shrugged. Everyone went to the opera—it was the meeting place of society. Aristocrats and wealthy merchants hired boxes set up like miniature drawing rooms. Until the star castrato or the reigning prima donna stepped forward to warble an aria, the box holders and their guests entertained themselves with cards, social chatter, even light suppers served by a cadre of footmen.

I could no longer afford such indulgence, but I sometimes gave a *soldi* to stand in the pit with the gondoliers and the caulkers from the shipyard. Between the spectacular illusions on stage and the floor fights among the supporters of rival singers, I was always assured of an interesting evening.

"La Rubina was murdered last night," he said tersely.

"What? Faustina Rubina, the soprano from the Teatro San Marco?"

Casanova nodded.

"Strange . . . I hadn't heard. What happened?"

"That is what I would like to know. I've spoken with Messer Grande. He and the rest of the constables blame the roving gangs that prey on Carnival revelers. Faustina had engaged a sedan chair to carry her to her destination following last night's opera. Her bearers report that the crowd on the Piazza was so dense they could barely force their way through. They had just got around some acrobats performing before the Basilica and set off down a narrow alley when they were attacked." Casanova paused and wiped his handkerchief over his forehead. When he continued, his voice quavered. "Apparently, the cowards turned tail and ran. Faustina was found in the wreckage of her chair with her throat cut and face slashed."

"A pity. She was quite a beauty, and not a bad singer."

"More than a pity, Signore, a criminal outrage."

"I take it you do not accept the authorities' theory about a gang of ruffians."

"I do not. Nor would you, had you been at the opera house last night. There was an ugly incident at the end of the fourth act. Faustina sang a stupendous aria. A nightingale could not have bested her trills. Her partisans were ecstatic. They threw flowers and sonnets on the stage and applauded wildly, but they were immediately drowned out by boos and hisses from her rival's claque."

"Brigitta Verdi," I said in an undertone, allowing the name to linger on my tongue. The feud between the two sopranos was a mainstay of gossip throughout the city. Brigitta had charmed Venice with her sweet voice and noble demeanor since her debut a decade or so ago. Her dominance had gone unchallenged until Faustina, with her vocal fireworks and wild, sultry beauty, had taken the San Marco stage by storm last year.

"Yes, Brigitta." Casanova infused the name with bitterness. "She is under the protection of His Excellency Bernardo Gritti. Though her voice is not what it once was, he can afford to pay a sizable claque to insure that her arias are always met with enthusiastic approval. Last night, the disturbance began in the pit with catcalls on one side and cheers on the other. It swiftly turned to a brawl that invaded the galleries and boxes.

"When my fiery Faustina ran to the front of the stage to urge her supporters on, Brigitta grabbed her arm. In an instant, the ladies were pushing and screaming like fishwives. Wigs went flying, and Faustina raked her nails across Brigitta's cheek, drawing blood that I could see from my fourth-tier box. One of the tenors pulled Brigitta into the wings, with the soprano shrieking that Faustina would never sing on the San Marco stage again."

"Surely Messer Grande has heard this tale and will be questioning Brigitta."

Casanova stopped under the shade of a bookseller's awning. He gripped my arm with a surprisingly strong hand. "Do you think the chief constable can afford to go against Signor Gritti, one of the most powerful men in Venice?"

I shrugged.

My companion shook his head. "No, Messer Grande is already sweeping the affair under the carpet. Read today's gazette. It mentions no details of the fatal attack, only warns people to be wary of the thugs that roam the city during Carnival."

I squinted up into the sunny sky. "What is your interest in all of this?"

Casanova moved his hand to his heart and dropped his chin, the picture of desolate grief. "I hadn't known her long, but Faustina had become my chief delight. Some call her arrogant, but I say that the lady knew her own worth and was simply determined to savor all that was her due. I handed her into the chair myself, not knowing the terrible fate that would befall her."

"Where was she going?"

"To the Calle della Verona. I keep some rooms there. I had ordered a late supper and was to meet her as soon as I could take leave of Signor Broschi's party."

"You want to know who killed her—what truly happened in that alley?"

"But of course, yes. And . . . well . . . there is one other matter."

I raised an eyebrow, already calculating a fee for my services.

"My darling was wearing a pair of emerald earrings. Faustina had not removed them since I placed them in her plump little lobes myself. Now they are missing—the ruffians tore them right out. I need you to retrieve them."

When I didn't speak, he floundered on. "You see, the earrings were not exactly mine to give. And they are quite valuable. I must have them back as soon as possible."

"Or face extremely unpleasant consequences?"

"You understand how we are forced to live in these reckless times, Signor Ziani." His heavy jowls stiffened and quivered. "Bravos in the service of Brigitta Verdi murdered Faustina and made away with the earrings. Bring me those earrings and I'll pay any fee that you ask."

The alley where Faustina had been killed was on the north side of the Basilica San Marco, the sprawling, domed church that presided over its namesake piazza. In my grandfather's time, Carnival had started after Christmas and ended with the observance of Lent. As my city's economic fortunes declined and she came to depend on the purses of foreign visitors, Venice had pushed the opening of festivities back to the first Sunday in October. Masqueraders now dominated the Piazza for six months at a time. The revelry began at dusk, giving everyone an opportunity to sleep off the previous night's dissolutions. This afternoon, only a pair of monks and a few paper-laden clerks dawdling in the sun watched me inspect the mouth of the alley.

I saw why the villains had chosen this particular site. The passage was hardly more than a slit between two lofty buildings, and it quickly doglegged to the right before emerging onto a secluded street that led to a domestic quarter. The buildings overlooking

the alley contained government offices. Their few grilled windows would have been dark and deserted when Faustina's chair was stopped.

One thing puzzled me. This alley and the street beyond led away from the Calle della Verona. Casanova's love nest lay in the opposite direction, several squares over from the west side of the Piazza. Had Faustina ordered her bearers to make another stop before her tryst with my employer?

I wandered back down the Piazza and found the bearers, along with some chairs for hire, across from the steps of the opera house. The two men were regaling a flock of onlookers with the tale of their miraculous escape from last night's bloodthirsty assassins. I used some of the expense money I had squeezed out of Casanova to tempt them away to a nearby tavern.

Both men were tall, with the well-developed shoulders of their profession. Once I'd given the order to fill their glasses, the older one with gray bristles roughening his chin began in a defensive whine. "I don't know what people expect. Why should we risk our necks for a woman we don't even know? We're given a few coins to carry the chair where we're told, not to fight to the death."

"How many attackers did you face?" I asked.

"Oh, four or five. Big fellows."

"Back on the Piazza, you were boasting of fending off only three men before they forced you out of the alley."

The younger man snorted into his wineglass. "No need to gild the tale. It's exciting enough as it is. There was only one man, masked and cloaked from head to toe. He waylaid us at the bend of the alley. His pistol was cocked and aimed straight at us. I'm always ready to throw a few punches, but what use are fists against lead ball? He ordered us to retreat. What else could we do?"

"You went back to the Piazza?"

"No, he waved us out the other end. We had to run all the way to the Campò San Zulian to find a constable."

"Did he have a knife?"

"Didn't see any knife," he answered, then grinned with one side of his mouth. "He didn't invite us to search his pockets."

I frowned, picturing Casanova's lurid description of Faustina's ripped face. "And was the lady still alive when you made your hasty retreat?"

"She was alive all right, screeching like the very Devil." That was the older one. He twirled his empty glass with an inquiring look toward me.

It was time to pose my last question. "Perhaps you can help me

understand one little detail. I was told La Rubina was going to the Calle della Verona. Why were you heading the opposite way?"

The older bearer clamped his jaws shut and suddenly became very interested in a stain on his breeches. His friend smoothed his face into a blank expression and answered in a mild tone. "That's right. The signora ordered us to the Calle della Verona, but we couldn't get through. Someone had started an impromptu *furlana*. Hundreds of people were dancing in a huge circle. We were trying to find our way around the crowd."

The older man agreed with a vigorous nod.

The front doors of the opera house were locked, so I circled the building and entered by the stage door. No one challenged me—the place was deserted. That night's performance would not begin for several hours.

From the dimness of the wings, the empty stage stretched toward a painted canvas that depicted an Indian temple. Layers of perspective created the illusion that I had stepped into a boundless, disorienting dream. Unaccustomed smells tickled my nose: the smoky residue clinging to the velvet curtain, the tang of rosin that the ballet girls stepped in before going onstage, and turpentine fumes rising from a forgotten bucket of brushes. Stumbling through the gloom, I searched for a corridor that would lead to the dressing rooms.

"Are you looking for something?"

I flinched. A raspy, disembodied voice hovered in the dusty air.

"You are not a theater person. Are you lost?"

I strained my gaze, searching the maze of dangling sandbags and looming canvas flats, but still saw no one.

At last the speaker drifted out from behind a huge papier-mâché statue of a many-armed Oriental deity. She was a tall woman, gaunt and bony with the loose skin of the ill or starving. Her gown of faded black blended with the mottled grays of the statue. Her pale hair was bound up into an untidy chignon.

"I'm looking for Brigitta Verdi," I answered. "She and I are . . . old friends."

The woman drifted closer. She had several needles trailing different colors of thread stuck in her high, old-fashioned collar. A belt supplied with scissors and other sewing implements circled her waist. I had been surprised by the company's costumer.

"Signora Verdi's dressing room is on the second floor." She pointed to a shadowy staircase. "But she is resting. She won't appreciate an uninvited visitor."

"Oh, she'll be glad to see me," I answered as I took the stairs two at a time, praying I wasn't telling a lie.

I found Brigitta drowsing on her dressing room sofa while her maid pressed some petticoats. When I spoke her name, she jumped up and ran to embrace me.

"Nicco! Where did you spring from? I've told you a hundred times that you are always welcome, but you never come up after performances. Now here you are in the middle of the afternoon."

The last time I'd encountered Brigitta Verdi, she left me hoping for everything while granting me nothing. The first bitterness had passed. What else could I expect? How could I compete with her current protector who possessed a palazzo on the Grand Canal and kept a fleet of ten sleek gondolas?

"I'm hoping you can help me."

She adjusted her dressing gown to better exhibit her shapely bosom. Dimples winked at the corners of her smile. "Delightedly, if I can. Come, sit here." She plopped down on the sofa and patted the cushion beside her. Over her shoulder, she said, "Maria dear, leave off ironing. Go find something else to do."

The maid practically skipped out the door. A child released from lessons couldn't have been happier.

"*Allora*, what in heaven could clever Nicco Ziani need my help with?" Brigitta tossed her unbound hair back over her shoulders. The curls were dark, lustrous, begging to be stroked.

I glued my hands to my knees and answered, "I wasn't even sure there would be singing tonight. The Teatro San Marco has lost one of its brightest stars."

"Is that why you've come? About Faustina?"

I nodded. "Someone wants a few questions answered."

"I see." She gave me a crooked smile and flounced from sofa to dressing table. Her brush crackled through the tumbling curls. "Faustina's death shocked all of us, but the opera must go on. The director would as soon eat a canal rat as refund ticket money. Ask whatever you like, Nicco." She met my gaze in the oval mirror before her. "You know I will answer as honestly as I can."

Suppressing a grimace, I remembered how exhausting my time with Brigitta had been. Part of what had kept me from restful slumber during those bewildering weeks was trying to untangle her truths from her lies.

"Did Faustina have any enemies?" I asked, plunging right in.

The brush didn't miss a stroke. "Not really. She had an artistic temperament—I suppose most singers do—but her rants were short lived and no one with good sense would take offense."

"What would send Faustina into a rant?"

"Oh, the usual sort of thing—the orchestra rushing her tempo, an unflattering costume, things like that. She could rave and curse like a sailor when her fire was up, but her tantrums always passed quickly, and then she was her charming self again."

"Competing with another singer—did that bring on tantrums?"

Brigitta whirled on her dressing table bench. "Oh Nicco, how funny!" She laughed heartily—a clear, bright soprano. "You must think I had something to do with the murder. You're absolutely wrong. Faustina and I got along beautifully. Ask anyone."

"It didn't appear so during last night's opera."

She rolled her eyes. "When the stage crew sounds the thunder machine, do you reach for your hat to ward off the raindrops? Or when they lower a god on wires—is it Jupiter come to life?"

"Of course not. But Faustina drew blood last night. You've covered the scratches with paint, but I can still see them."

"I'll grant you she overstepped herself that time, but it's all in a night's work. Our manufactured feud sells tickets. That's the important thing." She paused and her smile turned glum. "Was the important thing, I should say. Besides, can you really see me attacking Faustina in a sedan chair carried by a pair of burly bearers?"

"You need not have committed the deed yourself."

Frowning, she rose and pulled a bright, full-skirted costume from the wardrobe. After a moment behind a folding screen, she stuck her head out. "I see, you're trying to fix the blame on Bernardo. My dear, if Bernardo felt like he needed to soothe my ruffled feathers, he might buy me a new gown or a diamond brooch. But have someone murdered? Not Signor Bernardo Gritti of the Great Council. He has aspirations for the Senate, you know. He's hardly likely to do anything to sully his good name."

Brigitta came around the screen. Her costume was a vision of golden skirts topped by a bodice covered with shiny, coin-sized disks.

"Who are you supposed to be?"

"Cleofide. Tonight's opera tells the story of a warrior queen of the Kashmir who battles Alexander the Great." Placing a plumed helmet on her dark curls and retrieving a short sword from a wall hook, Brigitta brandished the weapon in a warlike pose. She stepped close. A hint of a smile had returned to her lips. Then her arm flashed, and I felt the tip of her sword press into the flesh under my chin. Cold steel this—no cardboard prop. "So, Nicco dear, you've decided that I'm a dangerous woman?"

"I've always known that," I whispered.

That made her laugh. Tossing the helmet and sword aside, she whirled to face her mirror. "Will you lace me up?"

With the soprano holding her hair out of the way, I took my time criss-crossing the thin laces that fastened her bodice up the back. When I reached the top, my fingernail snagged on a delicate thread. I pulled it away, and metal disks hit the floor like hailstones on pavement.

Frantically, I grabbed at the shining stream while Brigitta yelled for Maria.

"Oh, where is that girl?" the singer moaned. "I should never have let her go."

A black clad figure, the same that had startled me downstairs, appeared at the door.

"Ah, *Santo Dio*. Bring your needle, Lidia. I'm losing all my armor."

We made an odd trio. While Brigitta leaned on the edge of her dressing table, I pinched a thread to prevent further damage, and the seamstress chased the tiny, errant plates all over the floor. After collecting a handful, she whipped them back in their places with quick, firm stitches.

The older woman worked in silence for a moment, then glanced at me. "I see you found your friend. Have you had a pleasant visit?"

Before I could answer, Brigitta chuckled. "Signor Ziani isn't making a social call, Lidia. He's working. He makes his living stirring up hornets' nests."

Lidia furrowed her brow, but her stitches never faltered.

"He's asking questions about La Rubina's death," Brigitta continued, jumping as the needle pricked her skin.

"Forgive me, Signora. My needle slipped." The old seamstress sighed. "It's these terrible times we live in—murder and death pop up when you least expect them. To think of Signora Rubina, someone we work with every day, with her face cut to ribbons. It's terrible, terrible."

"It's all right, Lidia." The soprano clucked sympathetically. "We're all on edge today."

The gown was soon repaired, and Maria returned to dress her mistress's hair. As the seamstress left the dressing room, preparations for the opera drifted through the open door. From afar, an out-of-tune violin sketched a discordant tune, and just down the corridor, a tenor's mellow voice moved up and down the scale. Still, I searched for a reason to remain in Brigitta's presence, any excuse to allow the scent of lilacs that clung to her white throat to entertain my nostrils just a bit longer.

"The old lady is quite something," I mused at random. "She nearly made me jump out of my skin downstairs."

Brigitta shook her head. "Lidia isn't really that old, but she isn't

well, and misfortune has aged her beyond her years. She's a widow. Her husband died young, during the smallpox contagion some years ago. He left her a little house in the parish of San Zulian, but she was forced to take up sewing to support herself and her daughter."

"Surely her daughter is of an age to help out by now."

"The girl tried, but it was difficult for her to find work. She was quite shy and scarred from the same illness that killed her father. She worked here at the theater for a while, but she was never strong. She died several months ago."

Maria took several hairpins out of her mouth and whispered, "Took her own life, Signore. They say she drowned herself in the lagoon."

I looked at Brigitta's reflection in the mirror. She shrugged. "That is the rumor. Lidia refuses to discuss the matter."

Try as I might, I could think of no other excuse to tarry at the theater.

Out on the Piazza, dusk had fallen. Porters were stacking huge braziers with enough fuel to last through the night, while café waiters arranged tables and chairs under the wide arcades at the edge of the pavement. Gusting off the lagoon, the evening air seemed to swirl with heady anticipation. As I strolled away from the opera house, maskers appeared from doorways, gondola landings, alleyways. One wag, already drunk, sported two masks. Careening toward me, he displayed the leering grin of a satyr. Once he'd passed, the gentle smile of an angel backed unsteadily away.

I needed to speak with Casanova again, but I had one stop to make first. Crossing a lamp-lit bridge over a dark canal, I left the great square and headed east, all the while pondering the disguises that my countrymen seemed so eager to don. Locating the pleasure house where Casanova hired rooms was a simple matter, but paying for a few moments with the maid who served meals to the gentlemen and their guests nearly exhausted my expense money. Nothing was free in Venice in those days, not even questions. At least the wench provided some helpful information.

The Palazzo Broschi stood on the Grand Canal, beyond the Rialto Bridge. I expected to find Casanova there, dancing attendance on his latest benefactor, but if I wanted to catch him before they set off for their evening's amusement, I would have to hurry.

The last of my funds hired a gondola which set me down on the marble steps of the palazzo in under a quarter of an hour. The footman stationed at the tall bronze doors met me with a dubious

frown. My name carried a bit of rank, but he eyed my serviceable broadcloth jacket and breeches with disdain. As luck would have it, I remembered a thing or two about dealing with servants. I put on my haughtiest manner and was soon admitted and announced.

Signor Broschi had assembled an intimate group of ladies and gentlemen in the tapestry-hung drawing room. With cello and harpsichord providing background music, Casanova was entertaining them with a bawdy story about the Papal Nuncio and a stable boy. When he caught sight of me, he stopped short. Signor Broschi was all kindness, pressing me to partake of tea or chocolate as I pleased, but Casanova hurried me out of the room, pleading the excuse of important business.

I allowed him to imprison my elbow in a vise-like grip and propel me across the vaulted hall and into a dim chamber lit by a few flickering candles. As my eyes slowly adjusted to the gloom, I saw we were in a small chapel presided over by a sad-faced Madonna.

"What possessed you to come looking for me here?" Casanova was sputtering with anger. He had left his mincing French manners in the drawing room.

"I thought you wanted me to complete my mission as quickly as possible."

He dropped my arm. "You have the earrings?"

"Not with me, but I believe I know where they can be found."

"Well then, let's be off."

I strolled to the front of the chapel, reached for a taper, and lit another candle at the Madonna's altar.

Casanova was close on my heels. "What are you doing? What are we waiting for?" he snapped.

I didn't respond at once, just settled into the front pew, keeping a close eye on my employer. I judged him unlikely to resort to violence, but it never hurts to be wary. When I thought his eyes might pop from his head in frustration, I began. "First, Signore, a question for you. Why didn't you retrieve the earrings yourself, when you stopped Faustina's chair in the alley?"

His heavy face registered a look of astonishment that quickly turned calculating. He shook his head and opened his mouth.

I held up my hand to forestall his protests of innocence. "I had a theory only, but the serving woman in the Calle della Verona confirmed it. You ordered no supper for last night. You knew Faustina would not be in a fit state to partake of it."

"No, no. You misunderstand." He started to pace back and forth before the bank of candles. "I did bribe the bearers to take the route through the alley, but I never intended any real harm to come to Faustina. If only she hadn't been so proud, so willful. She

knew that she could only wear the earrings for a little while, that they were meant for Signora Broschi. But when I needed them, Faustina wouldn't give them up."

"You were growing desperate."

"Yes, I admit it. Signor Broschi had sent me to have the emerald settings reworked for his wife's name day—the celebration is just two days hence." His delicate lips twisted into an ugly sneer. "No matter how I pleaded, Faustina refused to return the earrings. Since she wouldn't oblige me . . . me, mind you, Casanova . . . the wench should be grateful I even bothered with her . . ." He trailed off, chewing at a thumbnail.

"So?" I prompted

"So, I thought the muzzle of a robber's pistol against her cheek would change her mind."

"What went wrong?"

He wiped his hand over his forehead, knocking his fine wig askew, not bothering to put it right. "Faustina covered her ears with her hands and bellowed like a she-bear. She thought I was a real thief, but still, that greedy slut clung to the earrings. I stuffed the pistol in my pocket and we grappled. I thought my strength would prevail, but she gave my manhood a powerful thrust with her knee and slipped from my grasp. She ran back toward the Piazza. From around the corner, I heard her cry, 'Thank God, someone's come. Help me. The brute is trying to get my earrings.'"

"So you ran the other way, leaving her to her fate."

"What else could I do? I didn't know that Faustina had the bad luck to meet up with her rival's partisans. They must have followed her chair, bent on taking revenge for Faustina's attack on their darling."

"It wasn't Brigitta's supporters that entered the alley."

"What? Are you telling me Messer Grande is right? Faustina was murdered by common footpads?"

I stroked my cheek thoughtfully. "No, not that either."

Casanova fell to his knees. The flickering light played over the sheen of sweat covering his forehead and cheeks, making him look like a man in the grip of a terrible fever. "Please, Ziani. If you know who has those earrings you must retrieve them. If I don't have them by tomorrow night, Matteo Broschi will have my head. He'll give me over to Messer Grande." He clawed at my arm. "I can't go to prison. I'm not like you. I couldn't survive. Get me those earrings and I'll give you anything you want. You have my solemn promise. Money, rings, watches, whatever I have. Please, I beg you."

As the fallen dandy bent his head and moaned, the Madonna

beamed down with her sad-faced smile and I quietly retreated from her chapel.

The clock tower on the Piazza had just bonged its midnight chimes. Looking up from my waiting place in the fatal alley, I could see a cold strip of inky blackness lit by a waxing moon and a few bright, crystalline stars. I shivered and pulled my cloak tightly to my chest. Earlier in the evening a few merry-makers had strayed down the alley in search of fresh diversion but retreated when they found only one very bored man, not even masked, leaning against a wall. Finally, new footsteps sounded from the direction of the Piazza.

Slowly they came, muffled slaps hitting the pavement in a funeral cadence. When the elongated figure wrapped in a black shawl came around the bend in the alley, I planted myself in its path and pushed my tricorne back from my face. My sudden appearance caused barely a ripple over the woman's pale, moon-lit features. She knew why I was there.

"Hello again, Lidia."

"Good evening, Signore. Your friend Signora Verdi was right to brag on your wits. She said you would discover the truth of what happened here." The old seamstress braced one hand against the wall. "How did you find me out?"

"You gave yourself away. You said that Faustina's face had been slashed, yet I knew that Messer Grande had suppressed the details of her death. When Brigitta mentioned that you lived in San Zulian, just a few squares away from this alley, I knew there must be a connection."

"Are you going to deliver me to Messer Grande?"

"I've been employed to recover Faustina Rubina's earrings, nothing more."

"The sow's earrings?" She started a laugh that ended in a racking cough. "Here, have them. The foul things are burning a hole in my pocket. I only snatched them because she begged so hard to keep them."

I tensed as Lidia reached under her shawl and fumbled at her waist. If I saw the gleam of sewing shears, I was ready with my own blade. But no, she reached for my hand and placed the small, dangling jewels in my palm.

I had no way to compel her answer, but I asked anyway, "Why, Lidia?"

"Because Faustina killed my Caterina. Just as surely as my shears sliced that she-devil's face, Faustina killed my precious daughter, my only child."

I spoke carefully. "I thought your daughter drowned herself."

Her voice was as cold and empty as the distant moon that stippled the alley in silver and gray. "My Caterina worshiped Faustina. She watched her from the wings, hanging on every note, then ran herself ragged doing errands for that ungrateful sow. When Faustina's last maid quit, Caterina begged for the job. She was so happy when Faustina took her on, but I knew trouble was bound to follow. Just one mistake over some damned costume and Faustina turned on her. The she-devil screamed that Caterina's ugly, pockmarked face made her ill and that she never wanted to see her around the theater again. My baby ran out into the night and straight to the lagoon."

Lidia's voice dropped to a whisper, her eyes stared past me into the shadows. "Some say the spirits of the unhallowed dead never rest. The priests call it sacrilege, but I know it is true. Caterina drove Faustina into my arms last night. She knew the way I always go home—we had walked this alley together a thousand times. Caterina's restless spirit delivered the evil sow straight to me. I don't know how I found the strength, but I cut Faustina's arrogant beauty to shreds just as my baby wanted."

I let the seamstress go on her way. My heart was on the flinty side in those days, but still, I couldn't turn a sick, grieving woman over to Messer Grande. I knew the cruelty of Venice's prisons all too well.

Casanova was another story. My employer had promised a hefty fee for the recovery of the earrings, but the promises of a cad impressed me very little. Rattling the emeralds in my fist, I pictured Casanova's cupid-bow lips whispering an endless string of promises into tremulous ears. How many hearts had been broken by his seductive lies?

We have a saying in Venice: One fish in the net is worth twenty in the sea. I pawned the earrings. ↗

MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Louie Psihoyos/Science Fiction/Getty Images

Bones of Contention

We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "April Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the October Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

CHAPTER 82: MYRNA LLOYD Is MISSING

ROBERT S. LEVINSON

I was one card away from a straight flush, hearts, queen high, displaying nary a twitch of emotion to Freaky Bakersfield, who was weighing the possibility I was bluffing like the fate of mankind rested on his bony shoulders. I was on the verge of scoring one of the greatest pots in the history of Los Angeles Police Central press room poker, when the red phone connecting me to the *Daily's* city desk screamed for attention.

I settled my hip flask on top of my hand, eased up from the table, warned Freaky to have his gluteus maximus in gear before I got back, and fought through the blue haze of chronic cigar and cigarette smoke to my desk.

Eddie Grimm was on the horn, the guy who cost me my exclusive on the L. Faye Tilden murders, but that's for another chapter in *The Life and Crimes of A. K. Fowler*.

"Eddie, this better be good," I said, not trying to hide my annoyance.

"How'd you know it was me, Augie?" Breathing like he had a whistle caught in his windpipe.

"I recognized your asthma."

"I suppose." He cleared his throat. "Augie, got someone on the line says he's an old acquaintance of yours, needs to talk to you urgent-like about somebody by the name of Myrna Lloyd, whoever that is." That got my attention. "He said you'd know."

"A movie star, big, big, before they were called superstars, before you were born, Eddie. Subtract thirty or so years from this year. We're talking late fifties, early sixties." That was all Eddie needed to know. More than he needed to know. That I loved Myrna Lloyd once was none of Eddie's business. "Mr. Urgent-Like tell you his name?"

"No. You wanna hang while I—"

"Just patch him through, Eddie." I glanced over to the poker table. Freaky was pushing a mountain of chips into the pot, adding his raise to mine. Hands were folding around. I covered the mouthpiece and announced to the room I was seeing the raise and bumping it another twenty. Freaky gave me the finger, switched off the nasty ogre face he always made when he was trying to buy a pot, and went back to looking indecisive.

"Fowler here," I said.

"Augie, hello. Long time." Although it had been years since I last heard it, I knew his maple syrup voice at once. I gave it a name even before he spoke it:

Tom Carpenter.

Except for Tom Carpenter, Myrna Lloyd might have married me, and chances are we'd still be together, blowing out candles on her birthday cakes.

"It's Tom Carpenter, Augie."

"Yeah, Tom? What gives?" No way I could pretend I was happy to hear from him. Some wounds heal and disappear with time. Others become scars that are always there to remind you of things you would much rather forget.

"Did he tell you it was me, the chap who answered the phone?" I let the question pass. He unleashed a desperation sigh and said, "Myrna's gone, Augie."

I shook my head at the phone.

I wanted to say something like, Myrna is dead, remember? I held off, wondering if maybe Carpenter's memory had deep-sixed.

For several seconds I thought we'd been cut off, then: "You hear what I'm telling you, Augie? I'm over at Hollywood Memorial Park. Calling you from my car phone. Her crypt's been vandalized. Her coffin's gone. Stolen. Myrna's gone, Augie. She's gone." The words escaped from him in a torrent of emotion that turned into a waterfall of undecipherable weeping.

I let it play itself out, then asked, "Why you calling me, Tom? Let the cemetery people know. They'll get the cops in on this."

"No. No cops. The note said no cops."

"What note?"

"The one in my mailbox, saying to come here and see that she was gone. And not to tell the police that she's missing, but just wait for their ransom demands."

"Myrna's been kidnapped?"

"Help me, Augie. Myrna would want that. Myrna always loved you more than she loved me. We both know that."

I didn't have to think about it.

"Wait there for me," I said. "I'm on my way."

I grabbed my jacket off the rack and one-stopped at the game long enough to grab my hip flask and tell Deke Sparrow of City News Service to play out the hand for me. I could have hung back another five, faked Freaky Bakersfield out of his Jockeys even if my fifth pasteboard came up a clunker, except—

—all these years later, Myrna Lloyd was again working her magic spell over me.

It's a twenty minute drive from downtown L.A. to Hollywood Memorial Park in early rush-hour street traffic on Sunset Boulevard. I made most of the lights heading west past tired buildings and storefronts dominated by signs in Spanish, across Alvarado Street and through a stretch of weed-filled hillside full of ramshackle homes dating back to the turn of the century. I eased my classic red Rolls Royce onto the Santa Monica Boulevard access curve, tore past more neighborhoods in dire need of a face lift, and soared through the rusted gates of the downtrodden cemetery that backed on the Paramount studio lot.

Not a minute or a mile went by where I didn't have Myrna on my mind, picturing her the way she was the day we met at the studio, on the other side of the cemetery wall, a half mile from where she was ultimately laid to rest.

It was before I became this prizewinning giant of crime journalism, the Rocky Marciano of my craft. 1961. I was in my late twenties, still dancing with the dream of leaping from bit parts to movie-star big and rich.

Paramount was celebrating its ninetieth anniversary year with a party the studio press agents had put together and I had wangled an invitation through Sunset Beaudry, a cowboy star I knew, who was on the lot shooting *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* for Jack Ford, playing fourth or fifth fiddle to Duke Wayne, Jimmy Stewart, and Lee Marvin.

Maybe four or five hundred people were squeezed inside a soundstage, elbowing in, out, and around an apartment set for the Blake Edwards movie *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, swilling champagne and grabbing Chasen's-catered delicacies from mile-high platters on sterling silver serving trays.

I spotted Edwards off in a corner, holding court with his stars Audrey Hepburn and George Peppard, and navigated toward him, intent upon making adulatory small talk that would conclude with my handing him my résumé. I always carried copies in the one-button, silk-and-cashmere jacket from Frank Sinatra's swanky

tailor, Sy Devore, that set me back a bundle and came out of the closet only for interviews and this kind of see-and-be-seen scene.

Halfway at him, I was brought up short by a hand capturing my arm.

"Slow down, pard," Sunset Beaudry said, shouting to be heard over the din. "I want you to meet someone special."

His other hand was around the waist of Myrna Lloyd, who had been Sunset's leading lady in two of his cheap Monogram movies three or four years ago, before she broke through big time playing the deaf mute who inspires a revolution in Selznick's *Sounds of Triumph*.

She leaned over, made a megaphone of her hands around my ear, and cooed in a voice as seductive as a siren's call, "Actually, I told Sunset I wanted to meet you." She stepped back, her wisp of a smile framed by modest laugh lines.

"Who do you have me confused with?" I said, fumbling over the words, unable to free myself from her bold, mesmerizing stare, her ocean blue eyes the size of boulders.

Sunset answered an invisible someone with a wave and excused himself with a wink for both of us.

Myrna said, "No confusion, Mr. Fowler . . . Sunset's friend, who visited the set one day when we were making *Gunmen of Abilene*. Every time I looked over, I caught you staring at me. You'd hurry-up turn away, but not always fast enough. Why didn't you ever say hello?"

"You were just a kid, playing Sunset's daughter, and—"

"I'm not a kid anymore, Mr. Fowler . . . Augie."

How it began between us, Myrna and me.

Within the hour, we had slipped away and were making erotic love in a garden paradise surrounding the Hollywood Memorial Cemetery lake, on a bed of fertile lawn shaded by twin cypress trees.

I headed there now after parking the Rolls.

The grounds had fallen into decay in the years since I'd last been here, although I'm sure the dead didn't mind. The lawns, the shrubbery, the trees; footpaths that once were lovingly looked after were now sad illustrations of the hard times that had driven the owners to bankruptcy upon the rise in status of Forest Lawn and Hillside Memorial Park among the families of the famous. Some tombstones were broken, others had been bent out of shape by tree roots.

In earlier times, Hollywood Memorial Park had been their cemetery of choice. The old-fashioned headstones and high-rise

monuments, the huge mausoleums and the countless lawn plaques bore names that reeked of movie history: Valentino; Fairbanks; DeMille; Huston; Muni; the Talmadge sisters; Charlie Chaplin's mother and son; call girl-starlet Virginia Rappe, whose death doomed the career of comic Fatty Arbuckle; director William Desmond Taylor, whose death was never solved; the notorious "Bugsy" Siegel, who brought Murder, Inc. to Hollywood and Las Vegas; even the great Al Jolson, until his family got a better offer from Hillside and he was dug up and reburied.

I navigated between the grandiose, mud-caked double tomb of Harry Cohn, the foul-mouthed tyrant who had run Columbia Pictures, and the far less imposing grave of Jeanette MacDonald's singing partner, Nelson Eddy, past the mud-encrusted monument to Tyrone Power, the dashing matinee idol and swordsman nonpareil in *The Mark of Zorro* and *The Black Swan*, to Our Tree, Myrna's and mine, the towering cypress on which I'd impetuously carved our initials the next time she and I shared an indecent hour here.

Parting the tangle of underbrush revealed our brief history, ML + AF. Top billing to her, of course, although she tried to argue me out of it. An X scarring my initials, my handiwork within a day of her news, that she'd taken up with Tom Carpenter and it was over between us.

I exhaled a deep breath of the past and strolled back to the Hollywood Cathedral Mausoleum under an armada of somber gray clouds rolling in from the ocean in advance of a rainstorm the weather boys had been predicting for a week.

Tom Carpenter was sitting on a marble bench by the entrance to the last aisle at the end of the mausoleum's main corridor, slumped forward with his elbows on his knees and his face buried in his hands.

He reacted to the echo of my footsteps, jumping up with a look of sudden relief on a wrinkled, shopworn face barely suggesting the hypnotic good looks of thirty years ago that I'd never doubted had caused Myrna to abandon my bed for his.

Dark circles rimmed deep set, bloodshot eyes that contrasted starkly with a plain vanilla skin color showing no evidence of the overripe suntan that had been his trademark. Once a sharp dresser, his jacket and slacks looked like they had been bought thirty pounds ago. His posture, once as sturdy as a flagpole, had taken on a fifteen degree angle.

"Tom, it's good to see you," I said, words I never expected to pass through my lips, meaning them more than he'd ever know. "Now, tell me. What's this about Myrna and—"

He cut me off with a gesture, grabbed my hand, and led me half-way down the aisle she shared with Valentino and several minor silent screen celebrities forgotten by time. The marble square that sealed her vault was on the floor, angled against the wall. The vault was empty.

He looked at me helplessly, laced his fingers like he was getting ready to recite a prayer. "You are going to help me, aren't you, Augie?"

"No," I said. Carpenter's jaw dropped and a snap of noise flew from his throat. I said, "Anything I do, I'll be doing for Myrna. Not for you."

He blasted me with his eyes. "Fine," he said, spitting out the word and following it up with a meaningless laugh. "Whatever ransom these rats want, I'm ready to pay them, and maybe someday you'll understand that anything you do for her you are also doing for me." His expression suddenly held a secret he showed no interest in sharing. I wrote it off as an actor acting.

"Not today, though, Tom. Probably not tomorrow, either."

"I did not take Myrna from you, Augie. I know you've always thought so, but it's not true."

I said, "Myrna died in your arms. She should have died in mine."

"Myrna shouldn't have died at all. The bullet that killed her was meant for me."

"Then it's a shame the shooter didn't have a better aim."

"Finally, Augie. At last. We agree on something."

I had a restless night, wrestling with Tom Carpenter's declaration when he caught me in the Police Central press room: *Myrna always loved you more than she loved me. We both know that.*

I'd let it pass without comment at the time, but the truth is I didn't know *that* any more than I knew whether to believe Carpenter believed *that* or used *that* as a sure ploy to get me to the cemetery.

Later, when he asserted, *I did not take Myrna from you, Augie. I know you've always thought so, but it's not true*, I knew Carpenter was flat-out wrong.

What I thought, what I knew: It was every bit Myrna's doing.

She was never one to stay with one man long, or only one man at a time. It was a carryover from her childhood, she confessed once, in a moment of extreme intimacy and rare candor. They were years straight out of Dickens, lower-depths parents who used her as illegal tender to pay the rent, fill the gas tank, replenish their stash, or hand her over to a new trailer trash pal just for the hell of it. She'd finally escaped, using her body to make it from the

Midwest to Hollywood, into the movie studios, and onto the silver screen.

I asked her, "Why are you telling me this?"

"So you know what you're getting into, handsome. I don't come with any long-term guarantees. No *Lucy* or *Donna Reed Show* here. Love 'em and Leave 'em Myrna, that's me. Yesterday it was mostly Leo Bennett. Today?" She tapped my nose with an index finger. "Mostly you."

"Tomorrow?"

"Ask me tomorrow."

"What if tomorrow never comes?"

"You do have a way with words, handsome. Maybe you should be writing instead of acting."

"You're saying true love's out of the question for you?"

"I'm saying true love may not be the answer for me. I play the field the way the field used to play me, then move on before the hurt can set in."

"I want to love you, not hurt you, Myrna."

She laughed and got to work on an imaginary violin. "How many times do you think I've heard that tune?"

"What will it take to get you to believe me?"

"How are you fixed for miracles?"

A few months later, she broke the news and my heart by announcing her decision to leave me for Tom Carpenter. I pressed her for a reason. "It's time," she said. "If it's any consolation, you lasted longer than any of the others, handsome." She nursed me through our final night together, urged me to forget about her and get on with my life, and paused at the front door, a silhouette against the early morning light, only long enough to blow a kiss across the room.

Tom Carpenter.

An Oscar in his trophy case and now Myrna Lloyd.

I aimed all my rage at him, although there were others I might have blamed—the actors, authors, singers, studio grips, politicians, and the occasional counter boy who took up some of the nights she strayed from me without more of an explanation than *I'm busy tonight*.

Tom Carpenter became and stayed my target, I suppose, because he lasted with Myrna longer than me—
—to the day she died.

Because Myrna married him, not me.

Because he, not me, was with Myrna the night she was killed.

Because he never remarried and further mythologized his claim of eternal love for Myrna by visiting her crypt year after year on

the anniversary of her murder, the widower in black emulating the "Lady in Black" who annually showed up at Hollywood Memorial Park to shed tears for Valentino.

A question also kept me on edge through the night, as much as Carpenter's words: *Thirty years after Myrna's death, what had motivated parties unknown to steal her coffin and hold it for ransom?*

Was this some cruel prank being worked on Carpenter, was that it? Or what?

Carpenter's call the next morning came at an indecent hour, in uncertain daylight, the battle of the birdcalls barely underway, his voice terrorized by what he was reporting. The crypt burglars had somehow managed to steal onto his walled Bel-Air estate without setting off alarms and had slipped a new note under his door.

I rolled into a sitting position on the bed, coughed the sleep into my fist, and said, "How much they asking for?"

"Not money," he said. "Myrna's diary. I give them her diary, they return Myrna."

"What's in her diary makes it so special?"

"Augie, damned if I know, damn it. If Myrna kept a diary, she never told me. You? She ever mention a diary to you?"

"I'm drawing a zero as big as my bank balance. What else? The ransom note say anything else?"

"Yes. If I don't hand over the diary, not only will Myrna be gone for good, but I'm a dead man." Sobs began gutting his words. "Why me, Augie? Why the hell me?"

"You were the one who was married to Myrna when she was killed. You inherited her estate. It's reasonable to think it included a diary she kept hidden from prying eyes in a dresser drawer, someplace like that?"

"I don't—I never looked through her . . . I was too depressed. The lawyers took care of everything. Sold the house. Our place in Palm Springs. Took care of the bequests, the donations to her favorite charities. The thrift shop people came in with packing boxes and emptied her closets, her dressers, her—" He seemed to run out of words.

I remembered something he'd said yesterday: *The bullet that killed her was meant for me.* I put the question to Carpenter, suggesting, "Maybe the shooter's been practicing since then?"

He groaned at the concept. "Nothing to do with a diary," he said. "A gambling debt, before I finally squared it away. Money I owed certain people in Vegas, well into seven figures when they came to

the house to teach my kneecaps a lesson. The situation got out of hand and—"

"Squared away the debt too late to do Myrna any good."

"That was cruel, a cruel thing to say, Augie." He began milking his tear ducts like he wanted to fill the L.A. River.

My eyes clouded over thinking back thirty years to the caller who brought me the news, a legman for Louella Parsons, Hearst's syndicated queen of Hollywood gossip, up against deadline and fishing for an exclusive quote from one of Myrna's past romances.

The way Carpenter explained it at the time, he and Myrna were returning home from a press screening of *Lawrence of Arabia* at the Cinerama Dome. Burglars were in the process of ransacking the place. Converting the make-believe of his screen image to real life, he charged at the one who'd pulled out an automatic. They wrestled for the gun. It went off, mortally wounding Myrna, while Carpenter was knocked unconscious by a blow to the back of the head. The burglars were gone when he roused. Myrna died in his arms.

I told Parsons's guy, "It's a great tragedy for all her fans, everyone who loved her."

Hung up on him. Got drunk and stayed drunk for a week.

Until this morning, Carpenter had never said anything to anyone about Vegas or a gambling debt.

I reminded him of the burglary story he'd played for the cops.

"Dramatic license. The truth about the gambling, if it leaked to Parsons or Hopper or even Harrison Carroll, it would've cost me a plum role I was up for that had Oscar written all over it. That would have taken me to the next level. Besides, nothing I said was going to bring Myrna back."

"Or now, from the sound of it."

He choked on my words, but recovered quickly enough to say, "What can I do, Augie?"

"No diary and all things considered, relax and wait to be killed."

The ransom demand hadn't included delivery instructions. They arrived the end of the week, in a note parked under a windshield wiper of Carpenter's Porsche while he was shooting a bit on *Wagon Train* at "Crash" Corrigan's Corriganville, the two-hundred-acre movie location in Simi Valley, by the Southern Pacific railroad tracks, where the old two-lane Topanga Canyon snaked out of the Santa Susana Pass.

He'd gotten the part after a desperate call to his old buddy John McIntire, who'd replaced the recently deceased Ward Bond as the

show's wagon master. It was a job Carpenter needed to sustain his Screen Actors Guild medical benefits.

For all his front and braggadocio—the lavish home, the expensive car, the name-above-the-title demeanor—Carpenter by his late fifties had become a sad reminder of the Old Hollywood, a Trivial Pursuit answer. He had one foot in bankruptcy court to go with the one foot in the grave warning he'd gotten from the crypt robbers.

The new ransom note set a day and time for Carpenter to bring Myrna's diary to Church of the Good Shepherd on Bedford Drive in Beverly Hills.

The name triggered another dormant memory. Myrna's funeral service had been held at Good Shepherd. She wasn't a Catholic, at best a practicing agnostic, but Carpenter wanted a photogenic central location that would be convenient to celebrities on the guest list he had put together and the media he was certain would be massing outside to capture the occasion for posterity.

Me, I wasn't invited, but I went anyway and stood among the fans and autograph seekers mourning the loss of the first woman who had ever meant anything special to me, feeling how James Dean must have felt a decade earlier at Good Shepherd, when his love Pier Angeli was inside marrying singer Vic Damone.

Equally vivid was the memory of trailing Myrna's funeral cortege to Hollywood Memorial Park and burying myself among dozens of gawkers being held back from the mausoleum steps by uniformed studio guards.

I had waited for the mourners to clear out before stealing inside to settle a bouquet of fresh red roses at her crypt. Afterward, I visited the cypress trees where we had first made love and touched a kiss to the carved heart I'd mutilated the day after she destroyed mine with her news about Tom Carpenter.

Then I remembered something that happened in the next two or three—or four—weeks while I was stumbling around in a scotch fog, angry at Myrna for leaving me, for demolishing any hopes I had that she would wise up and come to her senses one day, give Carpenter the boot, and come back to me. I remembered my head splitting at the sound of somebody trying to break down my front door.

Through the spy hole, the fun-house image of a somber-faced gent with tightly knit features overpowered by a misshapen salt-and-pepper goatee, a tie completely out of synch with his Brooks Brothers pinstripe. His name was Duberchin, he said. Attorney-at-law. The second Duberchin of Duberchin and Duberchin, L.L.C. Representing the Estate of Myrna Lloyd. The late Miss Lloyd in

her last will and testament had specified gifts for certain of her friends and, turning cautious in his choice of words, *certain of her special acquaintances*. Personally delivering mine, pursuant to Miss Lloyd's wishes, was the second Duberchin of Duberchin and Duberchin, L.L.C.

"Where do I fit in the cast, friend or special acquaintance?" I said.

"I'm sure I don't know, Mr. Fowler. There was no indication from Miss—"

"Yeah, fine," I said. I wanted Myrna, the real thing, the genuine article, not some reminder she was dead. I snapped the spy hole shut and went chasing after some hair of the dog.

A few hours later, I discovered the second Duberchin had left the package parked against the door. It was wrapped in the Sunday funnies; neat corners; frizzy gold-colored ribbon; "Augie" written on the gift tag in her elegant script, a tiny heart dotting the "i" in Augie the way she always did; small, about the size and shape of—

A small book.

A small book!

A diary, maybe?

Maybe, a diary!

I ripped backward through time, challenging my mind to remember what I had done with Myrna's gift.

I wasn't going to be like some people, who dress a mantle with an urn containing the ashes of a loved one. I wanted to put the past behind me and get on with my life. Out of sight, out of mind, but I couldn't bring myself to discard the package like garbage, so a few days later, moving stealthily under cover of a moonless night, I buried it sight unseen at Hollywood Memorial Park.

And managed to forget about it, rinse it out of my mind with more scotch.

Until now.

Except for camera-bearing tourists wandering the cracked, weed-riddled concrete pathways, pausing to pose and snap whenever they recognized a familiar name on a grave marker, I had the cemetery to myself. I navigated the dense underbrush to the cypress tree I had shared with Myrna, gave our desecrated heart a martyr's glance, and started digging with the small sharp-nosed shovel the nursery store guy promised was perfect for cutting through hard soil and roots.

I dug down a foot before admitting this wasn't the right spot.

I moved a few feet over and tried again.

Again, no luck.

The third try wasn't the charm either.

Thirty-something years ago, had I been so boozed up that night that I buried the package under the wrong tree? The theory bore exploration. I angled over to the cypress tree's twin, picked a spot, and began digging.

Nothing. Not until the next try.

I tossed aside the shovel and used my hands to push away the wet earth and pull out the book-sized package. Using the full moon as a flashlight, I saw no evidence of the Sunday funnies wrapping I remembered or the tag with my name, but the ribbon hanging limply around a muck-racked coat of aluminum foil was gold-colored enough to tell me I'd found Myrna's gift.

I waited until I was back home to peel off the foil. Through a second inner coat, this one clear plastic, I saw the word *Diary* on a red pebbled-leather cover with a strap connected to a silly lock. It was the kind of diary I always associated with adolescents who needed a place to hide their innermost secrets, fears, and longings.

Myrna's diary contained all that, but there was nothing childish about anything she committed to the page, beginning with the handwritten letter addressed to me she'd inserted under the cover.

Hey, handsome. If you're seeing this, I'm dead. It won't take you long reading this partial record of my reckless, outrageous, and highly enjoyable life to find the reason they came after me. It'll be as clear as the freckle on your cute butt. I'm entrusting this little corner of dangerous history to you because trust was the one quality I found in you and few others among the multitude of gents it was my pleasure to know, including in the Biblical sense. Hide the diary in a safe place and use it one day, when it can do you the most good. By the way, Tom was not a disappointment, ever, but he was never you. XXX and OOO.

Your Myrna.

The entries, bearing only an occasional scratch-out or correction, revealed a My Myrna who more accurately resembled an Everybody's Myrna. Over the years, from her earliest starlet days, she had been generous with the pleasure of her company. Producers, directors, and screenwriters. Singers, athletes, politicians, and scholars. One-of-a-kind one-night stands. Her set-side trailer a frequent rendezvous point for what she cataloged in her diary as either "brain food" or "body therapy."

Myrna saved snapshots and passionate, frequently obsessive notes of thank you and appreciation, the way sportsmen hang

elks' heads and hoist marlins, jamming them between pages on which she followed a performance review with a critical appraisal on her personal scale of one to ten, ten being best. Her highest marks were reserved for the conquests who brought a new trick into her boudoir on wheels. I smiled at my ranking. Instead of a number, Myrna had written:

Off the charts, but only one reason I must soon protect myself from falling madly, deeply in love with him, a trap for me with a real human being who deserves better than me. Oh, Augie. Oh, oh, oh, you sweet devil, you.

Her words still had the power to destroy me.

Einstein was a genius for pursuing a theory of relativity, not love. Love defies definition.

I felt as close as ever to Myrna.

Closer, maybe.

I raised the diary to my nose, inhaled deeply, and convinced myself I'd caught a lingering reminder of her favorite perfume, Diorrisimo, the floral scent that came in a Baccarat flacon.

All those other men—not just Tom Carpenter—they didn't matter.

Except one, and he was calling himself Alek Hidell.

Myrna had met him on a shooting range at Miller's All-Star Shooting Gallery in Northridge. She was practicing for her next picture, a co-starring role in a Universal big-budget Western with Jimmy Stewart and Julie Adams. He stepped over to offer her advice on her stance and did enough fancy showing off with his .38 Smithy and an Italian-made Mannlicher-Carcano rifle to capture her awe and an invitation to a home-cooked meal.

The next morning, she told her diary Alek was a modest, mediocre four by her measure, writing:

He was nothing special in the looks or body departments. Dark, suspicious eyes always on guard. An unsettling smile and a nervous laugh undercutting polite manners and a quiet voice reeking of New Orleans while he talked up Marxism as the one true hope for the future of mankind most of the night. Breathed easy after he split with the friend he phoned to come over and get him. The friend, Cubby, spooky-looking and not as gabby, barked at Alek to shut up when he told me it wouldn't be long before their place in the history books was guaranteed. Cubby apologized for the outburst, said he was a fan, and asked for an autographed photograph. I signed one for him and also one for Alek.

That wasn't the last of Alek Hidell in Myrna's life.

Slotted between later diary pages was an envelope postmarked Fort Worth, with a note from Alek and a photograph. The note thanked Myrna for her kindness and said the photo was in repayment for hers. It showed a somber Alek and Cubby standing shoulder-to-shoulder in a parklike setting, a freeway and office buildings behind them. Inscribed on the back in carefully plotted block letters was, *For Miss Myrna Lloyd. Two comrades-in-arms make ready.*

I didn't have to ask *Make ready for what?* any more than I needed the photo to know Alek Hidell's presence in Myrna's diary defined him as the reason her crypt had been broken into, her casket stolen, and Tom Carpenter threatened with death if he did not meet the kidnappers' demand.

I had stumbled into evidence that could give me the byline of a lifetime, probably a Pulitzer, on a yarn greater than all the prize-winning exclusives I'd scored since making the switch from acting anonymity to the business of deadlines and headlines.

I called Carpenter and told him I'd keep the meeting for him at Good Shepherd. He sounded relieved, but wondered, "Augie, aren't you scared they'll kill you, not just me, when they find out we don't have the diary?"

"You could say that," I said.

There was no reason to trouble him with the truth.

At a quiet hour somewhere between the final mass of afternoon and the first of evening, I settled in the last row of benches in the nave, left of the central portal, and admired the holy majesty bought and paid for over time by the practicing faithful in this grotesquely wealthy community, imagining I had accidentally stepped into a set built for the next DeMille epic. The people scattered around were few in number and caught up in their prayers.

After a few minutes, a priest did an awkward job of crossing himself and slid into the row alongside me. "You're not Carpenter," he said, his voice loaded with bad tidings. He had thirty years, six inches, and daily workouts at the gym on me. A mop of black hair overlapped his ears and hung over the back of his neck like a bargain-basement hairpiece.

"I know," I said. "And I'm betting you're not a priest. Does that make us even?"

"No, smart guy, but get ready to say your prayers if you didn't bring what I'm here to collect." He jammed the business end of a silenced pistol into my side hard enough to win a grunt. "You bring it?"

"You're what? CIA? FBI? Some other set of alphabet soup?"

"YWN—your worst nightmare if I hear otherwise. You bring it?"

"Say I did. What are the odds you don't pop me once I hand it over?"

"Fifty-fifty. Not that good if you keep me on this merry-go-round any longer."

"And Tom Carpenter?"

"The other fifty."

"Now that we have that out of the way—" I dipped inside my jacket and pulled out a folded sheaf of paper. He eased up on the pistol he had shifted to the side of my neck. "Worth reading before you do anything rash," I said, doing my best Bogart. "A little story I banged out on my trusty Corona before heading over."

"Why should I care?" he said.

"In a word, Alek Hidell . . . That's two words, isn't it?"

A voice behind me said, "I care, Mr. August Kalman Fowler. Pass it here."

I looked to see who had joined us.

This priest was closer to my age and made no secret of his baldness. His face had fallen into his neck and was the salmon pink color of someone who didn't get out into the sun much; pock-marked and acne scarred. It was vaguely familiar. I mentally peeled away thirty years and was willing to wager his friends called him "Cubby."

Cubby scanned the lead and first few paragraphs, contorted his lips into nothing you'd ever see on *Captain Kangaroo*, and said, "Leave us, Figley. I'll take it from here." Figley started to protest. Cubby gave him a look. Figley made the pistol disappear and retreated.

"That confessional there," Cubby said, pointing. It wasn't a suggestion.

"**Y**our story tells me you have Myrna Lloyd's diary, but not everything you write is factually correct, Mr. Fowler."

"Correct enough to cause an earthquake after it appears, Cubby."

"Another error, Mr. Fowler. The Cubby of whom you speak was killed last week in an unfortunate automobile accident."

"About the time Myrna's crypt was broken into and her coffin stolen?"

"Soon after, yes. We continue to mourn Cubby's loss."

"We. He work for you?"

"In a manner of speaking. Cubby was an independent contractor,

a recruitment specialist, who could be trusted to deliver the desired result on the occasional odd job."

"Like on November 22, 1963, with his friend Mr. Hidell."

Through the confessional window I saw him dismiss the thought with a wave of the hand. "You draw conclusions like a chimpanzee with a crayon, Mr. Fowler. Hidell acted alone. The finding made after serious and prolonged investigation. Disputed down through the years, but never disproved, as you damn well know."

"Give the chimp enough crayons and time and he may produce a masterpiece. My story may help to rethink and reevaluate those findings after it appears."

"The earthquake you mentioned."

"Kaboom."

"Have you filed the story with your newspaper?"

"Not yet, but trust me when I say my death wouldn't stop it. Or exhibits one and two. A postcard that puts Hidell in Texas when he supposedly was sopping up the party line in Moscow. A photograph that connects Hidell to an agency of the government and puts a second man with him on a scouting expedition to a certain grassy knoll in Dallas."

"You have these items?" He saw the answer register on my face. "What will stop your story?"

"The truth about Myrna. Her safe return. No need for Carpenter and me to spend the rest of our lives looking over our shoulder."

"And I get?"

"The diary and its contents. The postcard. The photograph."

All I heard for the next several moments was the chaotic buzzing of a horsefly loose in the booth.

"How do I know I can trust you to keep your word, Mr. Fowler?"

"You don't."

Laughter filled the confessional. "Mr. Fowler, any other answer and I'd have held you immediately suspect," he said, and proceeded to dish out the past like Thanksgiving turkey without the stuffing or trimmings.

Thirty years ago, Cubby recognizes that the man who calls himself Alek Hidell has a tongue that won't quit and, carrying on about Marxism and the history books, has told Myrna Lloyd enough to possibly link the two of them after their work in Dallas is concluded. Cubby knows he must dispose of her and the threat with extreme prejudice. Her husband, Carpenter, has outstanding markers he can't cover being held by gambling interests in Las Vegas and Cuba who owe favors to Cubby's employer. Cubby

enlists the gamblers' help in staging the incident that will culminate in Myrna's death.

The problem is resolved until thirty years later.

Carpenter, his career suffering and desperate for media exposure that might get him a job, tells Jerry Buck of the Associated Press that he is developing a screenplay around his late, beloved wife. The screenplay will be based on a diary Myrna kept more faithfully than she did her marriage vows, in which she detailed her numerous amorous adventures.

I said, "I would have spotted a story like that."

"Buck only gave it a line or two in his column, easy to miss, but we caught it and knew we had to deal with a ghost who'd come back to haunt us."

"Carpenter told me he didn't know about the diary."

"Then clearly, Mr. Fowler, one of us must be lying."

"A better actor than I ever gave him credit. What else?"

"Let's say he knew enough when we put the question to him to trace the diary to his wife's estate lawyers and your gift, and he was most accommodating when we asked his help in recovering it. The graveyard skullduggery was his brainchild. We'd have been far more direct. He also proposed excluding from his screenplay what he had once read about Alek and Cubby. For a substantial price, of course, as if we have our own set of keys to the U.S. Mint. Like all chronic gamblers, he has a propensity for betting on the wrong horses with the wrong bookmakers."

I phoned Carpenter when I got home. I told him only what I felt like sharing, that Myrna would be returned to the mausoleum before morning.

The news put a brass band in his voice.

He said, "Man, oh, man, I don't know how you managed it, you old son of a gun, but I owe you my life, don't I, Augie?"

I said, "Keep it, Tom. With my compliments."

I visited Myrna the next day, bringing a dozen fresh red roses as a welcome home present, before heading to Police Central.

Freaky Bakersfield looked up from his cards and whistled for my attention when I wheeled into the press room. "Check your desk, Aug. Your favorite graft, delivered about an hour ago. Who's the adoring fan with better taste in his scotch than in hack reporters?"

The Glenlivet was a premium '59, hard to find and currently selling at auction for more than a grand. There was a bright crimson bow hanging from its neck and a gift tag, unsigned.

"Something else," Deke Sparrow said. "Eddie Grimm called over

looking for you. Said to tell you that movie star you told him about the other day—"

"Myrna Lloyd."

"Her. Eddie said tell you the sheriff's boys have identified the victim of a hit-and-run this A.M. over in West Hollywood. He's been ID'd as her husband, Thomas Carpenter. He was also some kind of actor, right?"

I grabbed the Glenlivet and cracked the bottle heading for my seat at the table. "A damn fine one," I said, as I settled in. "Whose deal?"

THE MYSTERIOUS CIPHER

by Willie Rose

Each letter consistently represents another. The quotation is from a short mystery story. Arranging the answer letters in alphabetical order gives a clue to the title of the story.

EU HEVTFUB EUC GNIZPQ; GEU LVG JGUB HY WUNTD
HEVTFUB RYC PNGHUTNTD. EUC ZCYWPUI TYLLVGHY HCQ
HY ZCUKUTH V FNPPNTD.

— VTT LYYBLVCB

CIPHER: _____

ANSWER: A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Solution on page 51

REEL CRIME

STEVE HOCKENSMITH

René Balcer says he's always been fascinated with outlaws. So perhaps it should come as no surprise that the one and only script he helped write for *Star Trek: The Next Generation* was more film noir than space opera.

"I basically did a take on the old Humphrey Bogart movie *The Desperate Hours* but set on the Enterprise," Balcer says of the resulting episode, "Power Play," in which bad-guy E.T.'s take a group of crew members hostage. "One producer's comment was that my aliens sounded like 1930s gangsters. I don't think he meant it as a positive thing."

Fortunately for Balcer, he found a home with a more down-to-earth television dynasty that suited his talents better. He's written nearly two hundred *Law & Order* and *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* scripts, winning four Edgar Awards, the Writers Guild Award, and the Peabody Award in the process. Franchise mastermind Dick Wolf might get more ink, but Balcer played an important part in making *Law & Order* the hydra-headed ratings monster it is today, serving as L&O's top-dog writer-producer (or "showrunner" in Hollywoodese) for four years before co-creating *Criminal Intent* with Wolf in 2001.



René Balcer: photo courtesy NBC Universal

Though Balcer has become a television industry MVP through *Law & Order*, it wasn't the crime genre that first sparked his obsession with outlaws. The French-speaking Montreal native picked that up the same way he picked up the English language: by watching hour after hour of American TV Westerns as a child.

"I learned English from *The Lone Ranger* and *Have Gun, Will Travel*," says Balcer (pronounced bal-SAY).

He discovered mysteries later, devouring the works of Arthur Conan Doyle, Raymond Chandler, and Georges Simenon. Though Balcer's literary heroes sparked his desire to write, he began his

career not at a keyboard but behind a camera: He served as a combat cameraman for Canadian television during the Yom Kippur War in 1973. He later went on to work as a print journalist and, after that, a documentary filmmaker, but a very different kind of writing and filmmaking beckoned.

In 1980, he traded The Great White North for Tinseltown, moving to Los Angeles to try his hand at screenwriting. Whether or not he was successful depends on your point of view. For the next decade, he made a good living writing feature film scripts—none of which were produced.

"It was a ten-year exercise in frustration," Balcer recalls. "By the time you've finished writing something for one set of executives, they're fired and someone else is in. You're really at the mercy of the studio and the stars and the schedules."



Chris Noth and Annabella Sciorra in Criminal Intent: photo by Virginia Sherwood/NBC Universal

In the midst of yet another soon-to-crumble feature project, one of the producers asked Balcer if he'd be willing to crank out a script for a TV movie. While the movie remained tied up in studio red tape, the telefilm zipped through production and hit the airwaves.

"That told me television is much better suited to writers," says Balcer. "If you're writing scripts, you're writing them to be shot and seen, not to sit on a shelf somewhere."

More TV movie assignments followed, and they were indeed seen—by just the right people. On the basis of his telefilm work, Balcer was approached by Wolf's production team, which asked him to join the writing staff of a fledgling NBC drama, *Law & Order*. Balcer says his rise to the showrunner slot on the series was simply "a process of attrition."

"There was no dog-eat-dog," he says. "Some of the writers get thrown off the show or leave for whatever reason, and you acquire more experience the more scripts you write, and the show just gradually starts to bend in your direction."

After serving as *Law & Order's* executive producer/head writer from 1996 to 2000, Balcer decided it was time to move on. There was simply too much *order* to the rigidly structured

ensemble series, which rarely gave viewers a glimpse into its protagonists' (or antagonists') personal lives.

"I wanted to start telling different kinds of stories and get inside the heads of the people I was writing about more," Balcer says.

Though he assumed he'd have to leave the *Law & Order* universe in order to tell those stories, Balcer learned otherwise during a lunch meeting with Wolf, who was mulling over yet another L&O series.

"He said it would be just two cops, not an ensemble, and you'd get to spend some time with the criminals," Balcer recalls.

Wolf's bare-bones pitch was enough to intrigue the outlaw-obsessed Balcer, who sensed an opportunity to explore both the criminal mindset and a more eccentric, haunted lead character. He quickly agreed to flesh out the concept. The result, of course, was *Criminal Intent* and its offbeat hero, Robert Goren, a brilliant, driven NYPD cop Balcer describes as "a cross between Sherlock Holmes and Philip Marlowe, with a little Bob Dylan thrown in."

Goren (Vincent D'Onofrio) and his Watson-ish sidekick, Detective Alexandra Eames (Kathryn Erbe), quickly won a huge following, drawing an average of 14.3 million viewers each week at the series' ratings peak. But Balcer didn't foresee one of the dangers a hit series faces when it relies heavily on one character: star burnout. In November of 2004, just as an upstart series called *Desperate Housewives* was beginning to eat into *Criminal Intent*'s ratings, D'Onofrio passed out on the set and had to be hospitalized. The culprit, according to the actor, was the wear and tear of the show's strenuous shooting schedule. Something had to change.

"It's a grueling pace," Balcer acknowledges. "Both Vincent and Kate [Erbe] were working twelve hours a day nonstop, with thirty scenes each per episode when the average series star might have fourteen. The time shooting, the time at home learning the script—they carried it for four years, and they were exhausted."

So though he signed on for *Criminal Intent* partially because it wasn't an ensemble show, Balcer found himself working on just that . . . sort of. This season, Annabella Sciorra and L&O alumnus



Vincent D'Onofrio and Kathryn Erbe in *Criminal Intent*:
photo courtesy NBC Universal

as "a cross between Sherlock Holmes and Philip Mar-

Chris Noth joined the cast to take the pressure off D'Onofrio and Erbe. But instead of appearing on screen together, the characters have a sort of timeshare arrangement: The two detective teams alternate as the series' leads from week to week.

"It's worked out well," says Balcer. "And it gives [the writers] the chance to use a slightly different set of muscles. It's a nice change up."

What Balcer's next change up might be remains unclear: He's in the midst of a multi-year deal that should keep him with *Criminal Intent* for the foreseeable future. But one gets the feeling that he still yearns to try his hand at something completely different—and that, whatever it is, he'll be successful at it.

"It's not confidence," he says when asked about the almost blasé attitude he seems to have about his *Law & Order* and *Criminal Intent* achievements. "I just never thought about failure."

These days, it's old hat for a TV cop to go up against a serial killer. But one proposed new series ups the ante a thousandfold: Its hero not only hunts down maniacal murderers, he brutally kills them . . . because he's a serial killer himself.



Six Feet Under's Michael C. Hall will play the deadly Dexter. Six Feet Under © Home Box Office

Not surprisingly, you won't find this show on Nickelodeon. It's being developed by Showtime based on the pitch-black comic thrillers *Darkly Dreaming Dexter* and *Dearly Devoted Dexter* by Jeff Lindsay. A pilot (starring *Six Feet Under*'s Michael C. Hall as the killer/cop) was shot in Miami last November, and the network is expected to give its yay or nay on the series this winter.

Though he's a Florida resident, Lindsay wasn't tempted to become a regular on the *Dexter* set.

"They don't want the writer of an adapted book hanging around yelling about how they ruined it," he says.

Lindsay admits that the notion of a TV series about Dexter surprised even him when it was first proposed. Whether the series is picked up or not, he's just pleased it's gotten as far as it has.

"I didn't think it would happen this way," he says. "I thought it would get a film option and then nothing would happen. So this is a big improvement."



DAI THE POTTER

ANN WOODWARD

The noise was atrocious. Ten men and ten horses and all the dogs from several compounds had crowded into the courtyard space, which confined within its walls every scrape of hoof on gravel, every yip and yowl, every boosting grunt of mounting into the saddle, creak of leather against leather. Arrowheads clicked against their housings, bowstrings were twanged to test their tightness. Most riotous of all were cries of encouragement from nervous man to nervous man. For the ten guards who had accompanied Aoi from the capital to this large estate in the province of Bizen had not much experience in fighting, and they sought to stiffen their own courage by calling out their readiness to do great damage to any who came against them.

And really, Aoi thought, some of them could hardly be called men. They were all sons of important families, installed as soon as possible in the guards to serve until they were old enough to go into one of the ministries and begin their political lives. Three, Aoi had noticed, were barely whiskered, they were so young. The rest had proved not suitable after all by temperament or intelligence for government service and they resented still being in the guards, where they had to be out in every sort of weather and to patrol at night. Yet if they had the chance, they represented their life as one of unusual devotion to the emperor, involving hardship and danger. Every one of them, therefore, was full of his own importance and trying to convince himself that he was not afraid to go out on a sortie with these locals.

The house belonged to Aoi's uncle. Sent here long ago in charge of government troops at a time when there were many disputes over land, he had stayed on to develop his own property, which had been granted as a reward for his military service. Because he was a member of a prominent family he was exempt from land taxes, a most coveted status. Other landowners soon asked to be admitted into his boundaries so that they too became relieved of taxes. They paid to him much less than the percentage of their rice that would have gone into the government storehouses. Now

he managed very large holdings. As part of necessary security, he maintained an armed force, and these provincial men were gathered outside the gate, where they did not contribute to the noise but sat on their horses in the cold dark, waiting for their leader. An autumn moon still hung in the west, dimmed by mist that had blown in from the sea, which could not be seen from here but which always influenced the weather.

Aoi knew that it was her own guards who had insisted on this dawn action. She had heard the discussion.

"It is a vicious thing," her uncle had said. "Those people on the next estate have killed our potter, and he was a useful man. They have not only taken a life, but they have barricaded themselves in the field where it happened. There is nothing we can do about the potter but we must take back that field. What was he doing there anyway?"

"He was digging. We don't know why."

"But potters dig! They are always bringing in carts full of clay."

"Not clay. This time it was rocks. He must have found something valuable. That is why they have killed him. And they claim the field is theirs."

"The field where he was found?"

"Yes, but everyone knows where the boundaries are and it is ours. Now they won't let us onto our own land; they have put up barricades and they patrol."

There followed an animated discussion of the digging habits of potters and their knowledge of all sorts of ore for glazes and their tendency to keep their clay sites secret and their presumed greed for gold and copper. Loudest of all, of course, were the oldest of the guards from the city, where they could not possibly have ever known a potter or ever seen clay for the making of vessels. But of greed they knew a great deal.

"Until now no one wanted that field. It went fallow long ago, and it is at the extreme edge, so far away and right against the mountain. So why don't we—" her uncle began.

"But—"

"But—"

"But—"

Several voices of the guards rang out together, all advising a raid just at the lifting of darkness, when they would not be expected. They all took the tone of superiority that came naturally to men of the capital when dealing with provincials. It was a tone learned early by these sons of officials.

Her uncle seemed amused. The locals, hearing so much bluster, slid their eyes, hummed and muttered, and finally agreed. They

would leave before dawn. After that, no one had slept. Now they waited with patience for the uproar to subside and practical action to begin.

These guards! Aoi thought. They love their fine uniforms of red and white, and they think themselves important because they patrol the palace grounds. But just let them be sent into the dangerous streets of the western half of the capital and they are so afraid of those unruly people in the poor sections that they flee. So it is said. And listen to them now. They think that because they are in the country, all will be simple. Here there will be no confusing tangles of streets, no burned or fallen-down houses to search, only open fields and a few wooded places. They had not even bothered to discuss a plan of attack.

Her uncle came from his part of the house and passed near Aoi, where she sat beside the kitchen fire with O-hana, her maid. He looked embarrassed. "Ah, well," he said. "Um. We'll go then."

He went out and the shouting ceased. In the sudden hush they left with a beating of hooves and heaving-breaths of horses suddenly pressed to speed. Aoi looked at O-hana. She felt the weight of responsibility for what would surely be a fiasco. It was she who had brought these impetuous cowards. O-hana returned her gaze. There was nothing to say.

Lady Aoi, a woman trained in all the ways of the Japanese aristocracy, was lady-in-waiting to a princess whose father was Great Minister of the Right and, because the Great Minister of the Left was a useless fop, the most powerful figure in the nation. She was an incongruous sight at the moment, sitting on a small stool in the earth-floored room of a country house, wearing borrowed country clothes of indigo and white, her long hair tied up with ribbons and tucked inside the robe. She was there as a safety measure because of a certain incident.

Aoi was known to have knowledge of herbs and medicines. As a tempestuous child full of tantrums, she had forced her father to teach her to read Chinese. Such a skill was usually derided as unwomanly, and Aoi was sometimes reluctant to insist on what she knew from her reading. If she had confidence in her patient and in the family, she was happy to be of use. But there were times when the official medical men did not agree with her ideas for treatment and they became bitter against her. So she was careful.

Perhaps it had not been wise, but she had gone to the house of the man known as the Young Comptroller when called urgently in the deep nighttime. His wife was daughter of an acquaintance, and

she turned out to be a person of strong opinions. Her husband had a fever and it had persisted for two days, alarming the whole household. When he began to thrash and moan, they sent for the only help they thought would come at such a late hour. The physicians had their rules.

This was a very headstrong girl whom Aoi did not know well. Almost before she was inside the door, the young wife was urging her to use some little apples of medicine, pressed of half cinnabar and half gold, and given to her by a priest.

Aoi knew this famous combination to be poisonous. "Well, let us see how he is," she said in the mildest possible tone.

The room was close, all the odors of illness confined. "First let us open some outside shutters."

"What, and let in the night air?"

"But sometimes—"

"Absolutely not!"

"Ah." And then, "Have you bathed him with cool water?"

"No, no! That would open his skin to all sorts of harmful vapors."

"I see."

"But what is it? Why is he so sick? He is too young to die!" Curiously, there was a question implied here, a rather too eager acceptance of possibility.

"Oh, let us not speak of dying," Aoi said. "We must try to make him comfortable, then we will see about relieving the fever. Bring me water, both hot and cold. I will mix a little willow bar—"

"But I have here the very thing!" said the wife, proffering the small box of pills, each nestled into its little cup of pleated white paper. "The priest said—"

And so it went. Aoi warned against the priest's medicine in the strongest terms and refused to use it. The wife plainly did not believe that Aoi could know anything the priest did not know, and after futile efforts Aoi left. The man died next day and the wife was not shy about accusing Aoi, saying that if the red and gold pills had been given sooner her husband would have lived.

The prince came to see Aoi. "You cannot stop this vicious lie and she means to do harm. People will turn against you. Give her some time. I happen to know that there is a man who has been trying to visit her for months. Soon she will forget all this, especially as it will be noticed that she has a new interest and she will not want it remembered that her husband died because she ignored your advice. But you must go away for a while."

"Because I have knowledge? Because I contradicted a priest?" Aoi was too angry to cry, too near tears to be angry. She tore a

paper fan to pieces to relieve her confused feelings. But she agreed to go.

"I can only spare ten of my men," the prince said. "If my wife's father were here he would supply guards, but they are all still away visiting his estates. It is a long way and you had better have protection."

"Is that really—"

"Yes. There are bands of armed men everywhere these days. They serve the estate managers and the provincial governments, but they are prone to independent robberies, and," he smiled, "we cannot have anything happen to you as we are sending you out of danger."

And so O-hana had packed, and they had ridden part way in a light wicker carriage, then on horseback, to this large and comfortable house. Aoi found that every sight and sensation of being in the country came to her as a happy experience, stirring memories of her father and the time he had served as governor in a different province when she was young. She had made herself a part of the household, marveling that her uncle talked over local events around the fire with his managers and that the servants added their own viewpoints and bits of news. All this was very unlike the formality of life in the city.

In the quiet of a fresh dawn, after the men had ridden off, soup was served, and Aoi asked about the man who had been killed.

"Dai, it was Dai the Potter," said the woman who was dipping into the iron pot that hung over the fire pit. "You haven't seen him around? Cheerful little man, limped from childhood."

"What caused the limp?"

"Well," said another woman, "he was great friends with the young son of the master whose mother died when he was born. They were the same age, always together. So when it was time for tutoring, Dai went along too." She stopped, as if all were explained.

"But what happened?" said Aoi.

"Why, the other boys set on him, of course, said he made himself proud because he was learning to read. They broke his leg with a wagon spoke and he never walked right after that."

"He was only a farmer's boy, he had no need to read like the master's son," said another woman.

"It's why he called himself Dai, though," said the first. "He had learned that letter at least, he said, and it meant 'big' and he would stand with his legs spread and his arms out, making the letter, and he would say, look he was dai and no one could say not."

Aoi thought of the letter dai, a straight horizontal line that might well represent outstretched arms, a sweeping stroke to the left, making the head and a braced left leg, then the final stroke to the right, the other leg. She smiled at the image of a small man making himself big.

A cry from one of the kitchen girls who had gone out for water made them all look up. From behind the nearby trees, a roil of black smoke rose high into the air. Soon afterward the men returned, riding in loose groups through the stubble of harvested rice fields, the local warriors keeping apart from the red-robed palace guards, of whom there were only three, all wounded. The others had stayed to dig in the reclaimed field, looking for the gold they were sure to find. Aoi offered to see to the injuries, and she and O-hana went with her uncle to an outbuilding where the visitors were housed.

"What happened?" Aoi asked as they worked. "We saw smoke."

"Yes, well, we fired on one of their storehouses, and while they attended to that, we took back the field. Simple, really," her uncle said.

Simple if you knew how to do it, thought Aoi, but probably beyond my city friends. It turned out that all the blood came from cuts to their hands, as they had tried, in their eagerness, to dig without implements. Contending forces had not shown up at all, and the field was taken without any fighting. Aoi and O-hana bathed and bandaged and tried to discourage, with their silence, the boasting of the men.

"Really," her uncle said, "I can't see any reason to think the place interesting, there is just a jumble of white rocks, which have been exposed where a bank has fallen down on a steep slope. The rocks have no metal at all, they are white all through and there is no sign of ore."

They returned to the kitchen, where the warmth was welcome. Aoi was not satisfied that the death of Dai the Potter was at all explained. She spoke quietly to O-hana, asking her to arrange for them to see the place where the pottery was made.

"Oh, they'll never want that," O-hana said. "It will be dirty and they will say you are too fine a lady." A look from Aoi silenced her.

"I cannot enter ritual pollution by examining the body," Aoi said, continuing her instructions, "but will you please find someone who was there when he was discovered and get a full description."

"A description of . . . ?"

"I must know what method . . . You understand?"

O-hana, sure enough of her relation to her mistress to risk a little insubordination, sighed. "I must hear every gruesome detail

and leave nothing out from delicacy or turned stomach. Yes, I understand. But going into the pottery will be easier."

"Yes, let us do that first."

The kitchen was busy providing refreshment for the returned warriors and no one noticed when Aoi and O-hana left. They found an old woman, tiny and bent from years of labor in the rice fields, sitting on a sunny patch of wall. "Can you take us to the pottery place?" O-hana asked.

Seeing Aoi, who even in old clothes was an exotic sight, with her extremely long hair and pale, pale skin, the woman exhibited immediate sprightliness, as if apologizing for sitting down.

"No, no, auntie," said Aoi in country accents she remembered from childhood. "Autumn is the time to rest, when the rice is in the barrel. We should not disturb you except we don't know—"

The woman took them up a path through a grove of trees, beyond which stood an awkward, sprawling shed of many roofs and several outdoor areas. After tying up the hems of their robes, they stepped cautiously inside. The old woman flew on scuttling feet through every enclosure, crying the name of the boy who had been Dai's helper. The boy was not one to work alone and she could not find him.

Aoi had never seen such confusion. Tubs of clouded water; muddy tables; a row of boxy storage bins with wooden lids; piles of stained rags, bowls, brushes, and tools; a wheel to be turned by a kicking foot (as the old woman explained); shelves lined with wares of bottles, jars, bowls, and cooking vessels, both finished and gleaming with hard glaze and those waiting to be fired; and at the far end, the gaping doorway of an open kiln, built against the hillside. Clay everywhere, in many forms, and every surface covered with tan dust from it.

Overwhelmed with trying to make sense of what she saw, Aoi stood just inside the doorway and felt that she could not advance into such a strange place. She could not see a process here that would end in a practical finished piece of pottery.

The old woman seemed to feel the same way, and she nodded and laughed at the impossibility of a fine lady of the capital in such a storm of disorder. "Wait," she said. "Don't move. I must find that boy." And she went off, crying for Taro.

Who, when he came, was a tall, spindly child of maybe nine years. He dipped his head to Aoi and glanced at the old woman, looking for a clue about what was expected of him. She urged him into the workroom, spreading her arms and indicating every section of the shed.

"He's deaf, he doesn't speak," she said.

"But you were calling him," said O-hana.

"That was so someone would hear and send him."

Aoi gazed thoughtfully at the boy. His eyes flicked about in panic, knowing he must communicate and wary of the visiting lady. O-hana saved them both.

"What a good boy he is," O-hana said, touching his shoulder. And to Aoi, "Everyone must work in this place, and so he helps the potter and someday he too will be a potter, and it doesn't matter if he can't talk." She smiled and the boy, concentrating with aggressive attention, understood that she had said something nice. His face became like sunlight in the dim room.

With gestures and frequent searching looks to see that he was understood, he took them outdoors to the beginning of the clay process. There, running water filled a basin at the end of a long wooden arm, raising a pointed log; then the water emptied, allowing the log to drop into its pit and pulverize the stiff lumps of clay. There were rinsing tubs, mounds of drying clay slapped onto soft wood, further tubs of kneaded smooth material, and blocks covered with wet cloth, stored out of the sun.

"And where are the glazes?"

After much gesturing and pointing to finished pieces, he understood. These too were not as expected, not liquids of black, green, or yellow, but powders in the line of bins, and watery reds and milky whites in covered tubs. All the fired pieces she saw were of these three colors, but glazed and unfired pieces lined up near the kiln were red or blue-gray, dull as the powders.

The finished pottery was sturdy, made for use, not exactly rough but thrown with thick walls, tool marks still showing where he had cut or paddled, the letter dai carved near the base of each piece. Clay was not to make demands on Dai the Potter, he mastered it with careless skill. It was work that was alive from a sure hand. There is honesty in this man's product, thought Aoi. He had not been stingy with glazes; they were thick as the pieces themselves were strong, and there were small drips of brown from iron, the boy showed them. There were on one side of some of the pieces patches of dull gray, making a lively surface. The boy indicated by blowing across his hand that these were from flying ash that melted into the glazes in the intense heat of the kiln.

The boy looked at Aoi earnestly, hoping he had shown her what she wanted to see. It was all so much a part of his life that he could not imagine that she did not comprehend the whole process as well as he did.

All three women were by now moving around, though still wary of touching anything. Aoi paused beside the bins of glaze powder.

Each lid was marked with a small pictorial symbol. With gestures and patience, she began to question him.

"What does this mean?" The picture was of a pot with a wire handle.

He pointed to a black-glazed dish.

"Black?"

The boy nodded and then mimed dishing food. The design was of a pot like the one over the kitchen fire.

"Soot?"

He shook his head.

"Iron? There is iron in this glaze?"

Nods.

"And this?" Two trees fallen across each other.

He pinched a bit of gray between his fingers and mimed digging, pounding, pinched the powder again.

"I see."

Each bin was marked with a similar cipher to explain either what was inside or, more commonly, where on the estate it was to be found. There were also marks of varieties of small shapes repeated several times. The boy picked up cups and spoons to indicate that these were measurements and formulas.

"Dai the Potter may not have learned to read," Aoi said to O-hana, "but he learned the idea of reading and writing. I am sorry I never knew this interesting man."

The boy, catching the admiration in her expression, gawped at her. He walked with an exaggerated limp, his face a mask of scorn.

"Yes, he could not walk. But you cannot talk, and yet you have explained all this to three ignorant women."

The boy would not accept pride, but there was a seed of it now.

"Where are the glazes made? There must be grinders."

Indicating a far section of the estate, he implied that glaze grinding was done elsewhere. The old woman said, "They use a horse to roll the stones."

"Ah."

Under a stained cloth Aoi found a small round pot different from all the rest. Its glaze was white. She held it in her hands and searched everywhere for another like it. There had never been a white glaze on any pottery she had ever seen. It was not a stark white, like snow, but more the white of mushrooms, with depths of brown and blue. Any estate that could produce such white wares would command high prices from the collecting aristocracy, which was ever avid for novelty.

Aoi was experiencing the possessive pull of pottery held in the hand and it was completely beguiling. She wanted to own this pot,

she knew immediately that it would be perfect for keeping dried gardenia petals.

"Where is this glaze?" she asked the boy. "Are there more pots like this?"

He made a show of looking into every corner, abashed that he could not find any. Suddenly overwhelmed with the strain of having to make so many explanations, upset that he had been asked something he did not know, he scrubbed his face and knuckled his eyes to keep from crying, then ducked his head and ran off down the slope, back to his father's house where nothing needed explaining.

O-hana went to inquire for the men who had found the dead potter, and Aoi lay down on the bedding that had given her no rest the night before. As she slept, the white pot figured in her dreams. It was a rare glaze. All potters would envy the man who could make it. What went into such a glaze? Where did it come from? Had Dai the Potter used one of his invented letters to remind him of the place?

When she woke, things were clearer. What had seemed disorder in the pottery sheds now made sense, and Aoi realized she had come to understand the process from hard clay, pounded in a pit by a pointed log, to strained clay mixed with water, dried to a pliable state, kept moist until it was used, shaped, dried again, glazed, and fired. She had seen each step mutely represented, and she felt that she should be able to find the white glaze, which would be marked with a design relating to the site of Dai's death. Because it was surely for that unique glaze that he had been killed.

She rose and adjusted her under-ropes, more energetic than at any time since she had come here, now that she had a puzzle to solve. The same old woman knocked and entered just then, bringing the morning meal, clucking that the bed pads had not yet been stored, and shuffling back to the kitchen for hot washing water. "All this dust!" she cried, beating at the sleeves of Aoi's discarded robe and reaching for the box where clean ones were stored.

"No, no," said Aoi. "I must go there again. I'll just put on this one that is already—" and in spite of the woman's urge to tidy this curiously messy court lady, Aoi insisted, and took her along to the path up the hill.

The white pot was where she had left it, on the muddy table. She held it before her face as if it could tell her what made it white, which of all the powders and mixtures was new and rare.

She knew that Dai had been killed in a field where there was an outcropping of white rock. White seemed a good place to start.

Many of the glaze powders were white, but was there one that was marked with a sign that represented such a place?

One by one, Aoi looked carefully at the lids on the glaze bins. There were a cart wheel, a stand of reeds, a deer, a frog. She could see that these symbols each represented a particular place to the man who must dig out his own materials. She thought that she need not understand these positives, only the negative meaning that none could be taken for a bank with white stones.

The old woman was fretting and bored. Aoi tried to send her back to the house, but she refused indignantly, as if Aoi were a package she had been told to deliver safely before dark. She had pulled off a plug of clay from somewhere and was kneading it in her fingers. Aoi took it.

This, of all she had seen and imagined, led her to the essence of what it is that a potter does. It was cold at first, warming in her hand, giving her a clear print of the ball of her thumb. As if in a trance, she picked up the round white pot, put two fingers inside, and felt about. The inside was unglazed and there were marks just under the opening. Working the clay into a flat lozenge, Aoi pressed it into the inner marks and found reproduced in reverse the very proper Chinese letter that meant "white," followed by the simple horizontal mark that meant "one," and another that, though not clear, might possibly mean "outside." Well now, she thought. Good Dai the Potter had learned more writing than he admitted, and good Dai the Potter might have trespassed to dig the white rocks. She had no proof that the white glaze was made from white rocks in a field belonging to the next estate, but one might have to assume that this was true. Here was a complication indeed.

She studied the marks. The two parts of "outside" were not quite together as they should be. Writing inside a pot is not easy. She studied her clay impression further and then she saw what it said. The "white" was clear. But the "one" was meant to be the top stroke of "under" and what she had taken to be the right element of "outside" was actually the lower part of "under," and the left part of "outside" was a mistake or possibly code for his own use, a letter that had the same pronunciation as "right-hand side." Looking at the writing in this way, it said, "white, underneath, on the right." Dai the Potter, proud of his ability to write, had put the location of the rocks for white glaze inside the pot, for his own use.

O-hana returned late in the afternoon, facing the stony disapproval of the old woman, who forebore to actually say that the fine lady, crazy as she was, had been abandoned. The day had

turned warm and O-hana was not comfortable, especially because she did not particularly want to explain in detail how Dai the Potter had been killed.

Aoi surprised her by holding out a thin wire with clay-smeared handles on each end. "It was this, wasn't it?" she said.

"Yes. You heard?"

"No, I guessed. A potter killed him and this is a potter's tool. For cutting through clay. Who but another potter would care that he dug rocks with no ore and who else would know their value."

They waited until evening, when all the disturbances and disappointments of the day had been soothed by a hot meal and the usual many cups of wine. Then Aoi invited her uncle to sit beside her.

"Too bad about this morning," she said. "I gather there was not any ore after all. Are they really convinced?"

"Yes, but they have made themselves very tired and maybe we'll have a little peace for a while."

"Ah, we are a trouble for you."

He laughed. "No, no. It is rare that I get to see you."

"Will there be fighting about the field?"

"Well, I don't think they will consider it worth the loss of that granary. They will not bother us anymore."

"But someone must have told them it was worth a death."

"What are you thinking, lady?"

"Your potter was about to produce something entirely novel. He had discovered a way to make white pottery. And you know how much we in the capital value what is new. Such pottery would have been worth more than rice or fine silk, for trade and in the city markets."

"You are telling me we must look for the potter over there on the next estate."

"I think you will find him easily enough, when he comes to hack off some of those valuable stones."

And so it proved. They lay-in wait—this was one simple task that could be given to Aoi's guards, with a few guides to advise them. A man in muddy clothes came by moonlight, hammer in hand. They brought him to the house of Aoi's uncle.

Instead of being accused of murder, he was forced to take the place of the man he had killed. If he could learn to make the white glaze that had never been seen before, he would not be punished. Aoi's uncle would not discuss this development with her. He had noticed that Aoi seemed fond of the potter she had never met. And

he was unwilling to acknowledge that he too, perhaps, did not despise profit.

The white pot was broken to see if there were more letters engraved inside. There were not, just the three: "white, one, outside." Aoi chose not to mention her interpretation of the letters. She would not have the man who had killed Dai the Potter given credit for his valuable invention. She had pointed out the letters and the men found a way to print the reversed message, but they took it to mean that the glaze material had come from the next estate. Her uncle put pressure on the manager there and acquired the adjoining field.

She heard later that the new potter never succeeded in making a white glaze and that he was driven away as a murderer and a fugitive. He had never dug in the right place and the secret glaze remained a secret.

After some months, she returned to the capital to find that, indeed, the wife of the Young Comptroller had taken a second husband and that she was much criticized. The princess welcomed Aoi, and it was not long before all her husband's latest outrages against this principal wife were related to O-hana by the other servants and then to Aoi. The princess herself was too proud to complain. The Great Minister was again in his mansion, his warmth and strength available as steady support for Aoi, who was his favorite lady.

In a quiet moment during the winter, she sat in a patch of sunlight and remembered Dai the Potter, who had learned the idea of reading and writing. An old poem came to her that seemed to relate to the crippled man and his mute assistant.

Sunlight falls even
Into the thickest tangles
Of brush and brings out
Blossoms—a blessing of light,
A warmth so evenhanded. ♪

FUMES

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

He made them turn on the siren.

He'd never heard it from inside the car before. He was disappointed that it sounded so faint, not louder like he expected. The radio buzzed and burred, but he couldn't catch the words. The car smelled faintly of gasoline.

The officers made him sit in the back. They bundled him in quick like they were hiding him, then drove off faster than they had to, given that the emergency was over.

Ernie stared at the fine web of lines on the passenger window, making it even harder to break. No door handles, no locks, and a scratched plastic screen behind a metal grill, protecting them from him.

They hadn't cuffed him. They hadn't read him his rights like the detectives did on TV. But they were more efficient than those guys, wearing real uniforms and talking to everyone in the neighborhood.

He didn't look at the house, its back corner still burning. Certainly not at the garbage cans in the back, charred and burnt, their lids long gone. The curtains in the window above had become ash.

Funny the smoke had no smell. Except that little whiff of gasoline, like he used to get when he went to the gas station with his dad. He'd wait beside the car, hoping his dad would spill some like he did that one time. The entire car reeked of gas all the way home.

The neighbors milled around like they'd caused the fire. Mrs. Capuzio found his mom's shoe, teetering on its heel at the edge of the alley. Mrs. Nunez dialed 911, even though Mr. Okasan shook his head. Then everyone looked quick at Ernie, and then looked away, like they didn't want him to see.

Like he didn't know, even though he did.

The officers' voices were muffled under the burr of the siren. He almost asked them to shut it off, but they'd been doing him a favor. They'd given him that same look, that how-much-does-he-know? look, and mixed with it was another, the please-don't-make-me-tell-him, which he'd seen before, back when his dad died.

His mom had the look then. She kept rubbing her hands together until they were red and chapped. She didn't say nothing to him

until after the funeral, letting events explain most everything.

He'd been younger then. Stuff bugged him then.

But not now.

The officers, they said they were going to look for his aunt. Ernie hadn't seen his aunt since forever. She caught him sniffing model airplane glue once, and she took the bottle away from him, telling his mom that he'd be trouble.

He leaned back on the hard plastic seat and closed his eyes. They were dry and scratchy, like his throat. He ached in places he didn't even know he could ache. He'd fallen hard, hit his head, but didn't black out. He had known that: if he'd blacked out, he would've died.

He wished the police car would slow down. He wished he hadn't asked for the siren. He didn't like it. He wanted it to blast the thoughts from his head. To drive the scene from his head—the collapsed corner of the house, the smoke rising, the flame inside the walls like it was busting in from outside.

Which he supposed it had been.

Did she think he hadn't seen her? Hadn't she known he'd been watching her every single day since his dad's funeral; every single day since they moved halfway across the state to a town where no one whispered about them?

She said it was because he'd been blamed for the towel on the space heater, the candle beside the bedspread, even though he'd been the one who'd put out the flames. He'd even tossed the matches each and every time they found their way into the house.

What he didn't get was how come no one else saw her eyes get that crazy gleam when she saw a spark. How she walked to a flame, any flame, even the ones on TV, her fingers touching them like they were made of real gold.

He'd said something to his aunt at his dad's funeral, but she'd wiped her eyes and muttered something about model airplane glue. His mom hadn't heard, and even if she had, what would she have done? Tossed him out? He was the only one who kept saving her.

The only one.

The car finally stopped. He opened his eyes, saw the weird lights of the emergency room—all neon white and hospital blue, with that weird snaky symbol going up the side.

The blond officer got out of the car, opened Ernie's door, and helped him out. Ernie shook his head.

"I'm all right," he said.

The officer said something Ernie couldn't hear because of that buzzing siren—how come they didn't shut it off?—and took Ernie's arm. The hold was gentle. He could barely feel the man's fingers against his flesh.

The other officer stayed in the car. He had hardly even looked at Ernie, scared to make eye contact maybe, or maybe he knew.

Or thought he did.

Ernie stumbled forward, trying to keep up with the blond officer. He was getting tired. Maybe because he hadn't had enough sleep.

The smell of gas had woke him up. It had been stronger than it had been that day in the car with his dad. The last good day of his short life.

Ernie had known he was in a dream-memory and hadn't even wanted to open his eyes, but he had, and he saw her pouring an entire gallon into the closest garbage can just outside the open window.

He'd complained about having the room near the garbage cans, but she hadn't listened. He hated the smell of rotting food, the way it clung to the curtains even when the window was closed.

Which it wasn't. It was open, and the curtains hung too close, and he could see through them to his mom, standing in the middle of all the cans, biting her lower lip.

That crazy look in her eyes had gotten worse since Dad died, and the way she stared at that match, the flame shimmering in the gasoline fumes, Ernie knew she hadn't thought it through; she was just lost in the pretty flame, all red and gold and white, with a little trail of smoke rising. . . .

He got out of his room. Somehow, he'd gotten out.

Even the emergency room smelled of gasoline. One of the nurses looked right at him and looked away again, just like the neighbors, like the other police officer.

Only the blond one stayed beside him, hand lightly touching, voice filled with compassion. Even now, Ernie couldn't make out the words. Everything buzzed. Had they shut off the siren?

He couldn't tell.

The nurse took him to one of those examination rooms. The officer stayed behind. The nurse made Ernie sit on a bed. She gave him clothes—one with an open back—but he didn't take them. She talked, but he couldn't hear her either.

She shined a light in his eyes, nodded, held up a finger, then two. He knew what she wanted. He'd been through this before. They thought he had a concussion. Maybe he did.

He didn't say anything though. He was so tired. He just wished there was someplace on the planet that didn't smell of gasoline. Someplace without the awful buzzing.

Someplace where he no longer saw his mother's eyes widening as the flame caught the fumes, and the fire turned a funky blue—the only look of joy he'd ever seen his mother have—

Right before that last awful kaboom. ♫

THE COMMUTER

JANICE LAW

Considering everything, Randy had an easy commute. A straight shot down the Boulevard ahead of the school bus traffic, an admittedly tough merge onto the Interstate, followed by a hairy trip through the mix-master before the usual slow-going city streets. Not bad, really. He had colleagues coming in from the farther burbs who were in the car an hour or more. Not for Randy. He had the lower apartment in an older two-family house that suited him just fine. His landlady let him use the finished basement when he wanted to crank up his stereo, and in exchange for yard work, she kept his rent low. A sweet deal.

Which was typical of Randy's life, where the pieces of daily living fell into place quite easily. He pushed ads down at the big daily newspaper and did his job well. He had a superficial friendliness that never threatened real intimacy, a good memory for names and faces—useful in his chosen line of work—and a head for figures.

Randy could look at a number, and if it was important, he'd remember it. License plates, say. On slow commutes, he'd sometimes eyeball as many plates as possible and write them down from memory when he got to his desk. A keep-the-mind-sharp exercise of dubious utility, until he spotted her.

It was on the Boulevard, wouldn't you know. Randy was cruising along five miles over the limit in the carbon monoxide-suffused traffic when he noticed a blond woman in the car next to him. Curly hair, straight nose, full mouth—pretty hot, he thought. He let his foot off the gas and caught the license plate as her Nissan surged ahead.

Randy pegged the blonde as a young professional, an office manager, maybe, or some junior administrator. The city was full of them, and she would have been just one more license for his collection if Randy hadn't noticed her the very next day, turning onto the Boulevard ahead of him. He spotted the plate first—a little triumph of longer term memory—before the morning sun hit bright on the blond hair and he recognized her. She must live nearby; there were plenty of apartment buildings on the West Side.

After that, Randy began to look out for her coming and going. It was uncanny—she was on almost exactly the same schedule as he was, though she left work slightly later. Unless he found an excuse for a beer or a cup of coffee or a detour through the computer store, Randy missed her. But add a fifteen/twenty minute delay and he could almost count on seeing her going home. He got an odd lift from spotting the black Nissan which she kept spotless even in dirty weather, a meticulousness he approved. Randy was a detail person and always tidy.

One day he pulled up beside her as traffic inched along. The interior of her Nissan was empty except for a large briefcase on the passenger seat. She was wearing dark glasses against the low afternoon sun, and Randy couldn't see her eyes, just the line of her hair against her cheek, the half hidden curve of her eyebrow, the long, smooth line of her throat, but he realized that she was beautiful. Then the light went green, and stuck behind a turning car, he lost sight of her.

She lingered in his mind. Odd times of the day, Randy found himself thinking about her, wondering what she did and how the world looked through her particular windshield. He woke up on more than one morning with the conviction that he had dreamed about her, that he had been on the verge of discovering something, perhaps of seeing the eyes concealed behind her elegant sunglasses, but she was as elusive in sleep as in waking life.

He started timing his departure from work to the minute and was seriously out of sorts if he did not spot the black Nissan. The morning commute was less reliable; Randy decided that she worked erratic shifts or possibly did temporary or freelance work. But her return time was always the same. Around this intriguing fact, Randy constructed a number of elaborate—and erotic—scenarios.

The mysterious commuter came to occupy a fair corner of his imaginative life, but in the real world, he made little progress. It seemed unfair that he could only glimpse her in the midst of traffic when they probably lived in the same town, virtually neighbors. More than once, Randy found himself on the stairs up to the newsroom, intending to ask one of the reporters he knew—casually, it would have to be casually—how to find addresses from license plates.

There was probably an easy way to discover whether he and the blonde were neighbors—and to learn her name, but somehow Randy always turned back on the stairs or else went up to exchange Sox rumors and chew over the wonders of the revived Celtics because he was secretive and disliked anyone knowing too much about his business or his interests. Eventually, he decided to

follow her home, although it could scarcely be called following in the strictest sense. He would simply drive in the same direction because for all anyone knew, he would be on his way to the big supermarket west of the center.

Just the same, Randy postponed the experiment for several days, enjoying the possibilities. He was not particularly thoughtful or creative, but the blonde in the black Nissan had stimulated his imagination. Nearly every day, his mind threw up another possibility for their meeting and the exciting things that would surely transpire when they did.

Perhaps it was this unaccustomed access to alternate futures that made Randy feel a certain flatness in his daily life and contacts. He began to be bored at work, and the on and off dates he'd formerly enjoyed with an old classmate seemed a waste of time. He'd never had such an apprehension of destiny before, such a sense of things fated; he found the sensation overwhelmingly seductive.

Finally, one Friday afternoon, he left work at just the right time. He didn't realize this at first, because he was on Capitol Avenue before he spotted a black Nissan ahead of him. Was that hers? Randy craned his neck to see and had to slam on the brakes when the beige SUV in front of him stopped abruptly. Oh yes, he thought it was. Then the SUV pulled into the right-hand lane, and Randy caught a glimpse of blond hair. There she was, and he was tucked into the perfect spot just two cars back. This was the day.

Randy wove through the aggressive late-day urban traffic, along the rough, potholed streets and up the ramp to the Interstate, where the surge of drive-time traffic parted for him and he wound up in the cruising lane with the Nissan bang in front. When she took their usual exit, Randy followed. He wondered if she recognized him as a fellow commuter or perceived him subliminally as part of the normal landscape. That would be best. It would be best for her to find nothing alarming about Randy, nothing at all. The thought made him smile.

Down the Boulevard, into the home stretch, so to speak. Randy knew he could make this an ordinary day by sticking with his usual route all the way to Main. It was a curious sensation to know that he had the power to make his own day ordinary or extraordinary. How often can you say that? Savoring the feeling, he almost missed her turning light, necessitating an ambitious, multi-lane maneuver to follow her onto Brook Street. She'd have noticed if she'd checked her mirror, and Randy was irked at himself for letting his mind wander at the crucial moment. Not like him, not like him at all. If he'd been paying attention, he might

have recognized the first sign that destiny might not prove an unalloyed pleasure.

They drove north through the green and pretty suburb, before she turned right onto—What was the name? Randy hit the brakes and looked frantically for a street sign. Willard. She lived on Willard Street. All right! He took the next cross street and made his way home, promising himself to explore Willard. Maybe on foot, maybe a run—it wasn't that far from his neighborhood. He'd look for a black Nissan with the familiar plate and once he had that, he'd have her. She was maybe even a customer with his morning paper lying on her stoop. He laughed at that idea. It seemed to him that they already had certain things in common.

The next night, Randy lingered after work, and as expected, he did not see the blonde on his way home. He took the turn onto Brook, made a right on Willard, and drove slowly down a street lined with handsome older homes. A nicer neighborhood than he'd expected from the rental properties on the corner. Considerably nicer, but unfortunately, they all had garages. There was no sign of the black Nissan. When the short street dead ended at Underwood, Randy trusted to fate and took a left.

Halfway along the street he spotted a black car parked in the drive of a fine brick colonial. A Nissan? He made a U at the head of the street and cruised by again. Yes. She lived at—47 Underwood. After a quick check through the street directory, he knew that her name was Merlyn Divina, that the house was hers, and that there didn't seem to be a husband in the picture. Now all Randy had to do was contrive to meet her. He actually phoned her one day, quite legitimately—she wasn't a subscriber and the paper had a special offer. Her voice was low and smooth, like cream in brandy, an excellent sign, but she declined; she read the papers at work.

Randy might have found a way to meet her nonetheless. How much more effort would have been required to find her workplace? To find some excuse to visit it and to exclaim—with surprise and delight—Don't I see you on the Boulevard? You drive a black Nissan, right? We're practically neighbors. He had all the usual sales patter and small talk down pat. But he didn't do it, being in no hurry to turn his little adventure into an ordinary date—or anything else. This was already something better and more interesting than usual, since he knew her name and where she lived, and, as far as he knew, she was still innocent of his existence.

It amused him to observe her, to watch her house. He sometimes ran by on the weekends, and, at least once a week, he followed her home as far as Willard. When spring advanced, Randy

occasionally saw her in her front yard. She kept flowers in two big tubs and changed them with the seasons. He might have stopped to admire them—what could have been more natural?

Had Randy been introspective, he might have asked himself why he jogged by without even a friendly wave. And why he began to call her number and hang up as soon as he heard her voice. By imperceptible stages, observing her had grown to be something between a hobby and an obsession. Though he had to assure himself periodically that it was all quite harmless, he was loathe to abandon it.

One day he became careless, something a more thoughtful man would have examined and which even Randy took as a warning. It happened in the simplest manner. He wound up right behind her car on the Interstate, and the pink spring evening and various foolish impulses kept him right behind her all the way to Underwood. When he realized they were on her street, Randy got a little jolt; he'd never intended to be so obvious. He hit the gas and sped off, which hardly helped the situation.

He was annoyed with himself—and even more with her. It was the falseness of their situation that had put him in what he had to admit was a bad light. The whole thing was quite unjust, and he began to feel resentful and rather angry. Well, he'd show her.

For the next few days, Randy left work right on time, missing Merlyn Divina entirely. He stayed away from Underwood Street and stopped using the local pay phone to ring her house. Instead, he called up a neglected friend and invited her to a movie. Afterwards, they ate nachos and drank Newcastle Brown and laughed about old times. Ordinary life.

Within a week, he was convinced that the spell was broken. In some moments, Randy could hardly believe his own folly, skulking around—he hated to use the word stalking, but it resided somewhere in the back of his mind. He'd been wasting time on a purely imaginary relationship when the world was full of women pleased to spend time with a neat guy like him. Unlike the admittedly beautiful but unreasonable Merlyn Divina of Underwood Street, who had no interest in him or knowledge of his existence.

Randy felt that he had woken from an intense, unsettling dream, and everything returned to normal until he came out one golden bird-haunted morning to see a green car parked across the street. The driver pulled away as soon as Randy unlocked his Taurus, but he didn't really register the fact until he returned home that evening and noticed a pile of cigarette butts beside the curb.

Someone had waited there a long time—for what reason? Nothing good, Randy suspected; the street was not what it used

to be. He blamed a noisy family of teenagers who ran about until all hours of the night, and who had, his landlady assured him, older, undesirable friends. Everyone knew what that meant. Randy put the cigarette butts and the green car out of his mind as having nothing to do with him.

But soon he began to have the sensation that he was being followed. The green car—he was sure it was the same one—kept showing up along with telltale cigarette butts at the curb—at his curb—and more than once he thought he recognized cars close by him on his commute. Of course, that was only natural—hadn't he met Merlyn Divina that way? The whole commuter fleet headed east every morning. Just the same, Randy began to keep track of license plates, and he found it ironic that his little keep-sharp exercise might have real utility.

He realized that he'd developed an imagination, an unexpected side effect of his totally innocent pursuit—could he even call it a pursuit?—of La Divina. As a result, Randy told himself, he'd become prey to unreasonable doubts and fears. Yes, even fears. The day he came out to the newspaper's locked, gated, card-access-only lot to find his windshield smashed and both lights gone, Randy admitted he felt an instant's fear, succeeded immediately by anger.

He stormed over to the guard's kiosk. "You guys asleep? This is supposed to be a guarded lot. So who did this? We're talking broad daylight here." Randy cited indifference and carelessness, which was probably accurate but which did not get the guard on his side and probably didn't help the investigation along, either. The higher powers mumbled about urban blight and the extraordinary security the building employed (yes, Randy had to admit that) and the difficulties of a big open lot where the guard couldn't watch everything. The security costs were already frightful, the paper was insured, and he, Randy, was foolish to take the damage personally; there is a randomness to city life, to metropolitan crime.

Of course there is. Yet at some level Randy knew what had happened. His interest in Ms. Divina—how could anyone have taken that amiss?—had opened him up to danger. And though he told himself this was magical thinking, he couldn't rid himself of the notion. He became super alert on the ride home from work, memorizing every license plate he could spot and breaking into a sweat whenever he recognized a familiar one. As soon as he reached home, he scanned the curbside, anxiously looking for the cigarette butts which indicated surveillance.

He started looking over his shoulder while he was out running,

and when his landlady told him two men had stopped to ask for him, Randy's heart clenched. He changed his route to work, even though it added a quarter of an hour to the commute, and he started leaving the office at a different time each day.

Even as he did this, Randy was aware of his oscillation between fear and anger. Someone was following him, someone whose movements were unpredictable, whose motivation was unknown, someone beyond his control. This frightened Randy, who liked to be in charge, who liked the power of knowing things about other people that they never guessed he knew, and his fear made him angry.

He had no doubt that the Divina woman was behind this totally unreasonable harassment. Plus, the damage was mounting up. He'd had two good tires slashed right on his own block. The local cop, young and fresh faced, came, and Randy went into some detail, rehashing the incident in the newspaper parking lot too. But when the officer asked if he had any enemies, any arguments with his neighbors, any grudges, Randy hesitated and shook his head. What could he say that wouldn't put him in a bad light?

The situation was unfair, radically and completely unfair. He and Merlyn Divina were the next thing to neighbors; she read his daily paper; they took the same route home; she was often in his thoughts. Especially now. She could have been free of him if she'd simply left him alone. He'd almost forgotten her and life had returned to normal, but now, thanks to her vindictiveness, she visited his dreams. She really did, and Randy again found himself watching for the black Nissan and, once in a while, turning onto Brook and coasting by Willard on his way home.

This was her fault, totally. And she should have—must have—known better, Randy discovered, because she was a lawyer with a prominent firm. That fact gave him a little pause, suggesting, as it did, possible connections and a lawyerly way of picking right out of wrong and vice versa. But just the same, it would serve her right if something happened to her. Nothing too serious, he thought, but frightening.

He found himself daydreaming about just what that something might be. His fantasies grew increasingly elaborate and dangerous, but they remained unreal until the afternoon that he stepped out of the newspaper offices for a breath of air and, just for an instant, made eye contact with a man loitering across the street. Randy had a deep, uneasy feeling. He had friends who hunted, and they all claimed that prey animals can sense a hostile look, that they know when they're in a hunter's sights. In an instant, Randy understood that exactly and he felt a deep rage.

He turned around, went straight through the building and out

the back door to his car. He drove west, out Brook Street to Willard, and took the familiar left onto Underwood. Crafty, he passed the house, took the next two rights and wound up; as far as he could tell, parked directly behind Merlyn Divina's house.

It was just after two P.M.; the suburban street was deserted. While the school-age kids were still confined to class, their moms and dads were at work or play. Except for a few sparrows hopping along the gutter and the background hum of distant traffic, silence flowed uninterrupted and expectant.

Randy walked confidently down the driveway of a nice older home with diamond panes in a bow-front window and a fine slate roof. He glanced quickly at the house as he passed the side windows, but no curious or troubled homeowner appeared. Randy squeezed between the hedge and the garage, reached the back of the lot, and made his way over a neglected fence. He'd been almost exactly right. He recognized Divina's house to his left, beyond a jungle gym and a wading pool. He had to climb a chain link fence, and he left part of his good khakis on the spiky top. No matter. No one had seen him and it was all unfolding as it had in his head a dozen times or more.

Straight to her garage, well sheltered by shrubs. Randy might have meditated on the contradictory impulses of suburban life, which demands top of the line security systems and plants privacy-ensuring shrubberies. He noticed the security company sticker on the back door—what about the garage? The overhead doors proved locked, but Randy found the little side door had been left without an upgrade. He put his shoulder to it, and when, with a creak and a grunt, the door swung open, he stepped inside.

The garage was dim with only the leaf-filtered light of a single small back window. The building smelled faintly of gasoline, of mildew, of unpainted wood. Space for two cars; oil stains on only one; her space. Randy checked his watch. He figured an hour, and he took his time looking around. He found a surfboard, an older model mountain bike, a variety of softball gloves, and two bats. The athletic equipment surprised him a little; she had assumed such a clear shape in his mind that he had almost forgotten she had a separate existence where, it appeared, she played softball and engaged in strenuous exercise.

Convenient, just the same. Randy picked up one of the bats and hefted it. He'd break her windshield and frighten her good and tell her she was damn lucky he wasn't suing her and threatening her law license. But since they were neighbors—Yes, he thought that would do. He played out the scenario in his mind several times with certain pleasing variations and kept an eye on his watch.

When he thought it was about time, he moved behind her large storage cupboard and waited with growing excitement for the sound of a car pulling in.

Twice, he was disappointed by vehicles slowing on the street outside, before the sound of a motor, very close, was followed by a slight acceleration up the drive. With a creak and a rattle the garage door opener engaged. Bright afternoon sun slid through the opening to flood the back wall. Randy gripped the bat and tensed all his muscles. It would all be over in a minute; glass shattering, Merlyn Divina screaming.

The car rolled toward him and Randy slammed the bat on the hood—he'd swung too soon—and then with a great bang against the windshield, once, twice. The safety glass, cracked all over, turned to snow, so that Randy did not see the man in the passenger's seat who stuck a long, nasty-looking pistol out the side window and fired.

Randy felt surprise and then dismay to be falling backwards toward the cement floor which he never reached. He never heard Merlyn Divina scream—a satisfyingly terrified scream—nor heard her say, just a moment later, for she was, indeed, a lawyer and very cool-headed, "You fool, you've used a silencer."

The man made his excuses before pointing out that it would be a bad mistake if Randy was found in her garage. "Counselor, you gotta be like Caesar's wife or you're no use to the Family."

Merlyn Divina shook her elegant blond head in irritation. She hated Geno's allusions, historical or otherwise, and was not fond of associating with muscle, no matter how literate. Worst of all, he was right. She couldn't have this newspaper man found dead in her garage, not when he'd been following her for months. Professional advice had been to scare him off, but they'd been ham-handed, she suspected, and here he'd come for revenge.

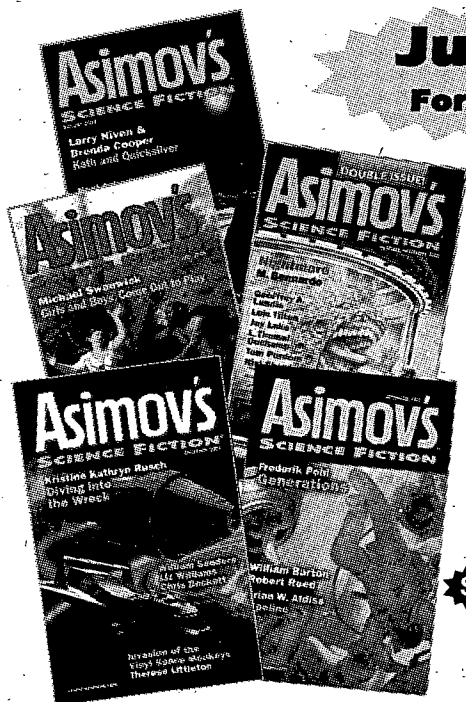
Well, maybe they'd been right after all; maybe it was mob business and not journalism business. She swore under her breath, for either way the Family had something on her now, something beyond legal advice, bought and paid for and strictly aboveboard.

She glanced at Geno, wondering if that might have been the point all along. You couldn't trust newsmen, but you couldn't trust the Family, either. This Randy guy had really messed up her life and, as she poked him with the sharp toe of her leather pump, Merlyn Divina thought that he'd gotten just what he deserved. ♣

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LOGIC PUZZLE BY ROBERT V. KESLING



It was not by chance that seven couples arrived at the old Victoria Hotel on the same night. The clerk accepted their credit card numbers and assigned them rooms on the second, third, fifth, sixth, seventh, ninth, and tenth floors.

The men were not what they pretended to be. They posed as a haberdasher, importer, journalist, car dealer, lawyer, merchant, and naturalist. Actually, they included an arsonist, bomber, cat burglar, drug dealer, enforcer, forger, and gunman. One husband was named Larry, and one wife was named Flo.

These criminals were well acquainted. Old enmities arose, old doublecrosses remembered, and old grudges renewed. Before midnight, one man had killed another.

1. Ike (who wasn't the killer) was on a floor adjacent to the "importer." Neither man was the victim.
2. Angie and the arsonist's wife were on adjacent floors.
3. Nate was on a floor somewhere above the "merchant," who was on a floor somewhere above the forger, who was somewhere above Mr. Rumford (who was not the "naturalist").
4. Karl was two floors below the "car dealer" and two floors above Mr. Unger. None of them was the victim. They were married (in some order) to Angie, Belle, and Cathy (who was not Mrs. Trump).
5. Mrs. Smoltz was three floors below Dolly and one floor above the enforcer's wife. They were married (in some order) to Hank, Ike, and Joe, none of whom was murdered.

6. Moe (who wasn't the arsonist) was on the floor just below Edna's husband and three floors above the "haberdasher." They included Mr. Osborne (who was not the killer), Mr. Potter, and Mr. Quillen. Mr. Osborne was neither Cathy's husband nor the bomber.
7. The "merchant" was two floors below Mr. Osborne and one floor above Hank. They included the arsonist, the bomber, and the cat burglar.
8. The drug dealer was on the floor just below Mr. Quillen and two floors above Ginger's husband. None of the three was the killer. They were posing as the "haberdasher," the "importer," and the "journalist."

Who murdered whom?

The answer will appear in the May issue.

Solution to the March "Dying Words"

WORD LIST

- A. Ostracize
- B. To date
- C. Thwarted
- D. Odd Fellow
- E. Phenomena
- F. Elkhound
- G. Nuthatch
- H. ZIP Code

- I. Laugh off
- J. Establish
- K. Reviewing
- L. Television
- M. Hittite
- N. Envision
- O. Chowchow
- P. Rumpus room
- Q. Integrity

- R. Moth-eaten
- S. Entertain
- T. Shenandoah
- U. Chinchilla
- V. Enhance
- W. Number one
- X. Enthralled

QUOTATION

Author—Otto Penzler

Work—THE CRIME SCENE (*The New York Sun*, Dec. 1, 2004)

"The Pulitzer winning author . . . Michael Chabon . . . has ventured into the world of detective fiction with 'The Final Solution' . . . and the detective happens to be . . . an old man who has retired . . . He remains unnamed . . . though anyone . . . will recognize Sherlock Holmes at once."

POLICY FORBIDS . . .

THOMAS MORRISSEY

"Most people think of insurance companies as cold, faceless corporations." The assistant director of human resources showed me a frosty smile. "But here at Cuthbertson and Washborne we consider ourselves a family."

"Sure, Ms. Cendre."

"Daisy is fine," she allowed.

No one was less a daisy; she was far more weed than flower. I was in no position to joke, though, so I found another two teeth for my smile. "Sure, Daisy. One big happy family."

She watched me with narrowed eyes. Arthritic fingers toyed with the glasses suspended beneath her wattle. Apparently she found my sincerity wanting because when she went on, disdain filled her voice. "Most families have black sheep, Mr. Billings. It is my job to cull them from among us, or at least to keep them on a tight rein. The program through which you have been afforded this job opportunity prevents me from the former, but rest assured I will do the latter to the utmost of my ability."

I added humility to my voice and held my smile. Barely. "I understand."

She let twenty seconds of silence emphasize her position before hooking her glasses over her nose and looking down at the desk. My folder lay before her. I noticed the D in "Denny Billings" was smeared. So much for a "fresh" start.

"During the probationary period, the employee is expected to meet or exceed the established performance standards for employees in that position and to learn and observe standard procedures and work rules." She flicked the folder open. It contained a stack of papers that she began to slide toward me one by one. "If you violate any of them you will receive one written warning. After that we reserve the right to terminate. Here at Cuthbertson and Washborne we believe in second chances," her disapproval as she looked me over spoke volumes about her personal feelings,



David Fielding

"but not third ones. Please initial each policy at the designated line to show you understand and will comply with these rules."

I dutifully picked up a pen.

"Policy forbids arriving later than eight forty-five each morning. Earlier arrival is encouraged; as we say, 'Early is on time, on time is late, and late is unacceptable.'"

No problem, I thought. I've been getting up at six for the last eight years. I initialed.

"Policy forbids consumption of alcohol or intoxicants of any kind before or during working hours."

No problem. Junkies and alcoholics don't get into The Program. I initialed.

"Policy forbids fraternization with fellow employees. Studies have shown the workplace to be a fertile ground for romantic relationships. That can lead to sexual harassment, and so will not be tolerated."

Definitely not a problem, I thought, initialing with a little extra pressure on the pen. Relationships can be murder, or conspiracy to commit it, anyway.

"Policy forbids . . ."

She kept giving me papers, I kept initialing. In the last eight years I'd grown accustomed to doing what I was told.

Prison does that to you.

They say a convict's mindset is one of the highest hurdles parolees have to overcome once they get out, but I found it worked just fine for me. The Elmira State Penitentiary had prepared me for the corporate world better than I'd have thought possible: Cuthbertson and Washborne also had a rigid structure, endless rules and the constant threat of humiliation-laced punishment for disregarding the smallest of them. I felt at home in the eight-by-ten cubicle they assigned me. It had more "guidelines" directing usage than Elmira, but I managed to settle into it over the next few months with minimal fuss.

My cubicle cellmate, Herb ("Call me The Cooch") Cucci, was a lifer, putting in his pension-mandatory thirty years behind a desk before "getting out of this hellhole." If Daisy was a weed, he was fertilizer. Every week he shoveled stories about women he'd been with, from "that wild divorcée at the Tucson convention" to "the hot chick in the marketing office across the street" to "the stewardess who showed me a new meaning for the word *layover*." I almost envied him. My most recent relationships haven't been nearly as much fun. The last one, in fact, was the beginning of my ending up here.

Every so often Cooch would ask about my past. Having been a little out of circulation recently, I tended to deflect the question. But I could have told him a story. I could have told him how my ex-wife emptied our joint account and the house of all furniture while I was on a hunting trip. I could have told him how I was so desperate for money that I stupidly listened when the friend of a friend of a friend wanted his cheating girlfriend "taken care of." I could have told him how the girl's brother was a detective who suspected something was up, and set up a sting operation. I never *did* anything—really, I don't think I ever could have—but it ended ugly: conspiracy to commit murder, seven to fifteen years.

But you don't share stuff like that with a man who calls himself "Cooch."

So I would nod, laugh in the appropriate places, and pick his brain for ways to stay under Daisy's radar. She hadn't warmed up to me at all since that first interview and obviously hated the whole idea of a parolee job placement program. To a high priestess of rules, being forced to accept an ex-con—the ultimate rulebreaker—into her fold was the worst affront. The substantial tax break her bosses got kept her from excommunicating me, so she made it her mission to send me to her version of hell. Whenever there was a "random" drug test, my name was there. If there was a spot check of computer usage, my account was always accessed. Even if she didn't physically take part in the inquisition, I felt her hand guiding it.

Cooch, of course, thought this was hysterical. "Hey, better you than *me*," he'd laugh, before launching into a story about almost getting caught screwing an intern in the copy room.

And I would shrug, grit my teeth in a smile, and wait for the next round of "random" policy implementation. Until one day . . .

"Sorry to leave you like this, Den, old buddy." Cooch stacked a few sports magazines on top of the last of his personal items. The corrugated cardboard box groaned. "But when they offer you a bigger piece of the pie, you don't say no, right?"

"No, of course not." Against all odds but not against the Peter Principle, Cooch had been promoted. I would miss him in the way you miss a noise your car makes for a while before suddenly stopping: you wonder if it signals the beginning of something worse.

"But look on the bright side—I got a peek at the personnel report of who's going to replace me in this luxury space." His eyebrows did a little jig. "Emma Bronson. Transferee from . . . I don't know, some state that starts with a vowel." The jig danced down to his lips. "You know what *that* means."

"Yeah, sure." I frowned. "What does it mean?"

"She's a *wiiild* one." He held up a hand for a high five. I pretended not to notice. He finally put it down. "All those country girls are. They come to the big city and let their inhibitions run wild. I mean, no one here's going to call Granny Bessie and report her for staying up past nine o'clock, you know?"

Great. A wild girl sharing my cubicle was not what I needed. My parole ran another two years; I could imagine how many headaches Daisy would give me over any perceived slights this girl might commit against the company. Policy forbids not being a rat on your cubicle cellmate . . . "Not every woman new to the city is looking for a . . . man like you," I said.

"Maybe not," Cooch grinned like he'd just done a body shot. "But Emma was living with her mother back in the Vowel State. Her *mother*. The old lady died, so she transferred here to make a 'fresh start.'"

"Where did you get all of this?"

"Around. Man, you're really going to be out of the loop now with me gone, aren't you?" He took the box and, with a grin, paused in the cubicle entrance. "Fresh start. In my book that means the party train's coming. A country girl who's been saving it up for so long has *got* to be ready for some fun."

I hung up the phone and sighed gratefully. My guy had been able to find me a ticket to the Yankees-Red Sox game on Saturday afternoon. As usual they were in a death struggle for first place in the American League East, and getting in was harder than finding something Daisy's policies *didn't* forbid.

" . . . And this will be your cubicle, and your desk."

The sound of her voice turned my neck and shoulder muscles to stone. *What now?* I kept my hands from becoming fists as I rose from my chair.

"Oh, he's here." Daisy stopped short in the entrance as if to avoid stepping in something nasty. The woman behind her flinched. "This is your cubiclemate, Denny Billings. Denny, this is Emma Bronson. She's joining our family from the Sioux City office." Her withered lips pursed in imitation of a teasing smile. Her gaze remained flat. "Don't you teach her any of your bad habits, now."

Emma hesitated a second before extending her hand, and she met my eyes for only an instant. "Hello, Denny."

Cooch would have been disappointed. Although attractive in an outdoorsy kind of way, she projected all the wildness of a convent student. Her makeup was clumsy and a touch overdone, as though

she wasn't used to applying it, and the color and style of her clothing reflected a life spent in a small town in the company of an aging mother. "Nice to meet you, Emma."

Daisy looked pointedly at her tiny gold watch. "I have to go meet with Accounting, so I'll leave you two to get acquainted." She shook a bony finger in what she must have imagined was a playful way. "But not too well—policy forbids fraternization."

Emma blushed; the natural color underneath her too-bright rouge was appealing. And she smelled nice, like apple blossoms after a fresh rain. "Of course not, um, Daisy."

"All right, then. Back to work." Just when I thought the storm had passed, Daisy stuck her head back around the corner. "Oh, one more thing—Denny, we're running an unscheduled internal audit of certain account and financial charts." She tried for sympathy and failed miserably. "Don't make any plans for the next couple of weekends."

Those next couple of weekends ended a month later. When I came in the following Monday morning, Emma watched me with neutral eyes. "Yours were the only cases they went over."

It was the first personal thing she'd said to me since she started. I blinked. "Excuse me?"

"In the unscheduled audit. The girl in Human Resources who helped me transfer is a friend." She blushed that attractive pink and looked away, then back at me. "She said your name comes up a lot there. You get audited more than anyone, and your work is always scrutinized more carefully."

I wondered what else people knew about me. If they knew I was on parole my life could get a lot rockier. Smooth might have been dull, but it was safe. I brushed my concerns off. "I have fans in high places, I guess."

"Daisy is no fan of yours." For the first time I heard emotion in her voice, and it was startlingly familiar—she spoke of Daisy with the disdain Daisy reserved for me. "She doesn't like you. I don't think she wants you working here. She's always asking me what you do, if it's anything policy forbids."

One bad word and a chain reaction would put me back at Elmira. I felt a chill. "What do you tell her?"

She gave me a sly look that said, I may have been born on a farm, but I didn't fall off a turnip truck. "I tell her she's a cranky old bat who ought to keep her nose out of other people's business."

"Really?"

Emma grinned shyly. "No. But I think it."

I stared at her. Her makeup was less obvious, and her outfit was better tailored than what she had been wearing when I'd first seen her. Maybe Cooch was right, and the big city was helping her blossom. "You *think* it?"

"I don't tell her anything, though. I won't spy on you for her." She blushed again and turned back to her computer. "I just thought you should know."

I was glad she wasn't looking at me because my mouth had dropped open. "Are you busy for lunch?" I asked.

Relationships don't work. I know this. My own failed relationship cost me almost everything I had. Someone else's failed relationship put me in jail for eight years. Cooch's failed relationships made him a lonely guy no deeper than a bottle cap. My own experiences had all demonstrated, as much as I ever needed to know, the uselessness of pursuing love.

So what was I doing dating Emma?

She was funny. She was smart. She was interested in living beyond the walls of Cuthbertson and Washborne. She'd taken care of her mother for years, incarcerated in her own way, and was now finally free to experience life.

What started as lunch led to another lunch, and another, then an after-work drink, then dinner. I learned about her childhood in Iowa, how she'd had to cut college short to return to the family store, and how she'd had to sell the store and move back home when her mother had gotten sick. I told her about my past, about my stupidity and its result. I told her I could relate to her feeling trapped, and I admired her for doing what she did voluntarily.

When I fell for her, I fell fast and hard.

So hard, in fact, Daisy was bound to find out.

"What happens now?" I asked.

"Now, Mr. Billings?" Daisy looked down her nose to make sure I had signed my own name on the Official Employee Written Warning form. "Is the policy unclear? Now you end your fraternization with Miss Bronson or you will both be terminated." A gleam of self-righteous triumph lit her face. "I expect she may find work eventually, but you? The Program is quite clear about the consequences doled out to those insufficiently rehabilitated to maintain gainful employment."

Back to Elmira; The Program had some important reputations riding on it. "You'd do that?"

"What I do is not the issue; the consequences come from *your*

actions." She set my write-up aside and reached for a file to mess with some other poor sap's life. "Good day, Mr. Billings."

The weight of what she could do, what she *would* do, anchored me in front of her desk.

She glanced up, annoyed at having to repeat herself. "Good *day*, Mr. Billings."

Numbly I shuffled to the door of her office, but of course there had to be a final jab.

"I strongly suggest you focus on your job for the next nineteen months. I have transferred Miss Bronson to another department to facilitate your doing just that." Before I could ask, she said, "Do your job and leave her out of it. Policy forbids my discussing any further details."

I returned to the solitary confinement of my cubicle and stared at the walls for the rest of the day. Too many years suffering the fallout of bad relationships gave me an understanding of the value of what I had. People not in relationships talk about the qualities they'll find in their one true love, but they don't understand: you can't look for love with a checklist in your hand. And while there may be sound reasons for giving love up—although if there are, they escape me—corporate policy isn't one of them.

I wasn't going to stop seeing Emma, so I began to play scenarios in my mind. They weren't pretty. Emma had no savings. After taking care of her mother and seeing to the funeral she was living paycheck-to-paycheck. If she were to lose her job she wouldn't be able to afford her apartment. The idea of her moving back to Iowa was unthinkable. My parole prohibited me from leaving the state. I couldn't go back to prison for another hour, let alone six-plus years, but what was the point of staying out of prison if I had to do it alone?

"Bitch."

Daisy was the problem. No one else in Human Resources would pursue this with such gusto. I thought about how much easier life would be if she weren't around. I thought about how, in the end, I wouldn't have been able to "deal with" that cheating girlfriend eight years ago.

Now was a different story.

I followed Daisy home to Queens that night. The weight and shape of the gun in my pocket was terrifying. The whiskey pint bottle was reassuring.

For someone who wielded such power over people, she lived in a fairly crappy neighborhood. I wasn't sure if gunshots, muffled or

not, would bring a police response quickly or even at all. I spent the next few hours walking around, figuring out my best approach and my best escape route. When the whiskey was gone, I made my decision. People might see and report someone skulking around, so I marched right up to her door. I pulled my sleeve over my finger when I rang the doorbell—one thing I had learned in Elmira was how to cover my tracks.

Footsteps from inside made the liquor bubble up into my throat. In the brief moments before the door opened I flashed back over my life. Was what I was about to do worth it? Was I really capable of going to such drastic ends to hold onto love? I saw Emma's face in my mind.

Yes I am.

And then Emma's face wasn't in my mind, it was right in front of me. I took an involuntary step away, stuffing the gun back into my pocket. "Uh—hi?"

Annoyance at being disturbed melted away when she recognized me. "Hi, honey. Come on in."

I followed her, mystified as I closed the door behind me. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question, and I bet we'd give the same answer." If she was bothered by our circumstances at work it didn't show. She led me through the foyer, to the back of the house.

"I'll bet we wouldn't," I muttered.

She stopped outside a swinging door that looked like it led to the kitchen and gave me her sly look. "I'll bet we would."

She pushed the door open.

Daisy lay on the tile floor, arms and legs spread out like flower petals. A messy crease parted the hair on the back of her head as well as her head itself. My eyes popped.

"Policy forbids fraternization?" Emma looked like she wanted to spit. "My mother was just as bad a control freak. It took me too many years to figure out how to deal with her." She sneered at Daisy's corpse. "I wasn't going to make the same mistake twice."

"I—I—"

She turned to me, and she was again the blossoming Iowa girl. "I wasn't going to let her send you back to prison. Not after all you've been through. Not after what we've been building."

"I—I—"

"Did I do the right thing?"

In her eyes I found my answer: relationships do work, if you're both on the same page.

"I love you," I said for the first time, but not the last. ♡

PUT YOURSELF IN MY PLACE

Two uniformed officers brought him into the main jail at four o'clock in the morning and took him into the booking office. They searched him and took away all his personal belongings except his cigarettes and handkerchief. Then, while one of them fingerprinted him, the other one wrote out a receipt for everything they had taken and gave it to him. After that they marked the gun they had found on him and put it in a filing cabinet labeled: EVIDENCE LOCKER.

The desk sergeant asked him his name and he told him it was George Carter. Asked if he had ever been arrested before, he said no. After a dozen more routine questions they booked him for armed robbery. He was taken downstairs to the lockup and put in a cell by himself.

After he was locked up, he lighted a cigarette and stretched out on one of the four empty bunks. What a rotten break! he thought bitterly. What a lousy, rotten piece of luck!

Two hours earlier, after a week of careful planning, he had gone into a medium-sized midtown liquor store just before closing time and pulled off what should have been a perfect holdup. He had forced the night manager to close up while he was inside, then had locked the frightened man in the washroom in the back while he rifled the store. It had turned out to be a nice haul; two or three hundred from the register and, as he had expected, about three thousand from the safe in the office. And he had helped himself to four bottles of the best Scotch in the place just before leaving.

Up to that point everything had come off just right. He was already thinking what a nice vacation he could take when he added this haul to the money he still had left from his last job; the fifteen hundred he had tucked away in a safe deposit box. That would make nearly five grand altogether; enough for maybe three or four months in Mexico City if he didn't live too-high. And he

wouldn't. He never had been a big spender. A modest apartment somewhere, a couple of suitcases of good clothes, loafing around in the warm Mexican sun in the afternoons, jai lai or the dogtrack and a few drinks in the evening, the bullfights or Acapulco on Sundays, maybe a friendly little waitress or cashier for an occasional night on the town—and that was that. His needs were simple, not too expensive, not much more than the average working stiff on his annual vacation. The only difference was that where the working stiff labored all year for his pleasure, he himself worked only a few minutes at each job, usually no more than four times a year. And for the past three years he had been doing quite well at his chosen profession.

But it's all over now, he thought. It had ended suddenly and unexpectedly when he had let himself out of the liquor store and walked right into the night manager's brother who had come to drive him home. That in itself might not have been too bad; under other circumstances, he might have slugged the guy and still gotten away clean. But it didn't work that way. The night manager's brother was a vice squad cop, off duty at the time but nevertheless armed. Needless to say, he was immediately suspicious, seeing a stranger coming out of the darkened liquor store with both coat pockets bulging. He had come up with his gun already out and George was caught.

Now, just two hours later, George was in a cell facing an armed robbery rap. And the phony name he gave the booking sergeant wasn't going to help him much either. Within forty-eight hours they'd have a make on his prints from the FBI and find out his name wasn't George Carter at all. They'd find out he was George Maxwell and had done time twice before; two years for burglary 'way back when he was just a punk, and five years on another armed robbery, a sentence he had just completed three years ago. So he had been on the street for thirty-six months and now, when they got his record, he would be facing twenty years under the habitual criminal statutes. He was thirty-five now; a twenty-year bit would just about finish him.

Just a bad piece of luck, he thought again, sighing heavily as he saw the last of his thoughts of Mexico City fade away. He dropped his cigarette to the cement floor and let it burn out. Then he turned his face to the wall and thought about what was ahead.

It was only about an hour later, not even daylight, when they brought in the nervous man with the glasses. George was alerted when the cell door was unlocked, but he did not look up. He just lay quietly and listened until the cell was locked again and the

turnkey's footsteps faded down the tier. Then he raised up to see who his roommate was.

The man was well dressed; at least, he had on a good suit and white shirt and necktie and his shoes were shined. He was about George's age, a little thinner, a little less hair. He sat tensely on the edge of one of the bunks, anxiously fishing out a cigarette and having trouble striking a match to light it.

Noting the man's nervousness, George thought he might be a junkie. He was about to lie back down and ignore him, but just then the man saw that he was awake and got up and came over to the bunk directly opposite George's.

"Excuse me," said the man, his voice quaking slightly, "can you tell me how I go about getting word to a lawyer? I forgot to ask the policeman outside."

George shrugged. "You're entitled to one phone call," he said. "Didn't they tell you that when they booked you?"

The man shook his head. "No," he said, looking confused.

"They should have," said George. "What they got you on?"

The man looked at George dumbly. "What?"

"What's the beef?" George repeated. "What'd you do?"

Now the man smiled rather weakly. "Oh, I didn't do anything. I mean, not really. I'm a witness, you see, and I ran away so I wouldn't have to testify. Now they're coming to take me back."

George wrinkled his brow, watching the man closely. "I don't quite get you, pal."

"It's really very simple," the man explained. "You see, my name is Harold Craig. I was a bookkeeper back in Kansas City. I worked for an accounting firm that audited books for various businesses. Well, one of the companies we serviced was owned by this man Alfred Tulo—maybe you've heard of him?"

George's eyes widened at the remark. "*Maybe*" he had heard of him! Big Al Tulo, one of the really big powers in the Midwest mob. One of the chief officers in the national syndicate. One of the accepted leaders of the legendary American Mafia. And this square wondered if George had ever heard of him!

George gave the man a rather nauseated smile and nodded his head. "I know who you mean. Go ahead."

Harold Craig cleared his throat. "Well, we—that is, the firm—didn't know anything about this company Mr. Tulo owned. All we were responsible for was keeping the books in balance, you see. And I was the one in charge of the account."

"I did most of the auditing myself, but as I said, it was simply a matter of figures and account names. No actual knowledge of the company's business operations was required."

"Well, one day while I was balancing the audit for the third quarter, several men came into the office. They were federal officers and they had subpoenas for everyone, including me. It seems they were conducting some kind of investigation into Mr. Tulo's businesses. They even had a court order requiring Mr. Tulo to produce all his books and accounts in court. Of course, as it turned out, Mr. Tulo wouldn't have been able to bring his books to court anyway, because the very next day—a Saturday, when no one was around—a fire broke out in the office and burned everything in the place. It was certainly a coincidence that such a thing would happen right at that time, but it did."

George smiled knowingly. Yeah, some coincidence. He could just picture Tulo's boys sneaking in the back door with cans of kerosene.

"Anyway," Harold Craig went on, "that very night two of Mr. Tulo's associates came to my apartment and said Mr. Tulo wanted to see me. I thought he wanted me to try to reconstruct his accounts because he asked me if I remembered the names in the books. I told him yes, I could probably recall most of them. Then I got the surprise of my life. Mr. Tulo said he wanted me to leave town and not show up in court to testify. Of course, I told him I couldn't possibly do that because it would be against the law. Well, that didn't impress him very much. Very calmly he said, 'Okay, boys, put a hundred pounds of concrete on his feet and dump him in the river.' Just like that! And he meant it, too, he really did!"

No kidding, thought George. *Man, how square can one guy be?* "So how'd you get out of it?" he asked Craig.

"I almost didn't," said Harold. "But it seemed that Mr. Tulo was a little reluctant to have me killed, since there had been some unfavorable publicity already about the fire. So he finally agreed to the original plan of having me leave town. He gave me five thousand dollars and the name of a lawyer in Los Angeles to contact when that ran out. And he warned me not to come back. He said he'd never let me testify even if it meant having me shot right on the witness stand. And I believe him, too."

"You'd better believe him," George said quietly. "From what I've heard of Big Al, he'd do it. How'd they catch up with you anyway?"

Harold shook his head dumbly. "I don't know. I've been moving around a lot since I left. I just got to town three days ago. I even used a fictitious name when I registered at the hotel. All I know is that about one o'clock this morning when I got back from a late movie, three detectives were waiting in my room. They brought me down here and one of them said there would be a marshal here

to take me back on the morning train. That's why I wanted to see a lawyer, to try and stop them from taking me back."

"Save your money, pal," George told him. "If that marshal is on his way, it means he's already got an extradition warrant signed. There's not a thing in the world you can do but go along with him."

"Oh," said Craig helplessly. He sat staring at the floor, turning slightly pale, probably, George thought, thinking about his future. Just as George himself was thinking now about his own future. His, of course, was probably better than Craig's, but not much better. An hour ago he would have sold his chances of beating a twenty-year rap for a nickel. But now things were a little different. Now maybe he had a chance, a faraway, outside chance. Because all the while Harold Craig had been telling his story, a crazy idea had been running through George's head. And the more he thought about it, the less crazy it became, until right now it looked like the chance of a lifetime.

George stretched out on his bunk and laced his hands behind his head. Looking up at the ceiling, he said casually, "No sir, Harold, a lawyer couldn't help you at all. The only person in the world who can help you is me."

Thirty minutes later Harold still wasn't convinced. "I don't know—" he kept saying reluctantly.

"Harold, I *know* it'll work," said George urgently. "Look, let's go over it one more time. First we change your clothes, see, and you give me your glasses. There's not that much difference in our appearances; let's face it, Harold, we're both pretty average looking. Then when that marshal comes, I'll go with him in your place. You just stay in the cell, see? I'm pretty sure nobody in the booking office will recognize the switch because at eight o'clock the night shift will go off and the day men will come on duty. The marshal will check me out instead of you. I'll go back with him on the train and when we get to Kansas City I'll tell them who I am. They'll check my prints and find out I'm not lying—and they'll have to let me go!"

"I don't understand," said Harold, puzzled. "Why will they have to let you go?"

"Because all of this will be happening tomorrow morning, an hour or so after the train gets to Kansas City. I'll spring it on them right away. I'll demand a lawyer immediately. When they get a make on me, they'll find out I'm not wanted anywhere and they won't have anything to hold me on. They have to let me go, Harold; it's the law."

Harold still could not understand. "But you'll be wanted here, won't you? When they find out you're out instead of me."

"No, Harold," George explained patiently. "They'll still think you're me because you won't tell them any different, not right away, at least. See, you just stay here in my place until they come to take me for an arraignment. You go up in front of a judge and he'll read off a charge of armed robbery to you and then you plead not guilty. They'll ask if you have a lawyer and you say no. The court will appoint a public defender for you then. And that's all there is to it. They'll take you back to your cell and within the next day or two the public defender will come to see you. That's when you cop out, Harold."

"What? I what?"

George sighed heavily. "That's when you tell them who you are, Harold," he said patiently.

"Oh. Well, what happens to me then? What will they do to me for helping you get out?"

"Not a thing!" said George happily. "That's the beauty of it, Harold. You tell them I hit you in the head with my shoe or something. I knocked you out, see? And you were still groggy when they took you in for arraignment; you didn't know what was going on. All you've got to do is act a little stupid. Believe me, when the public defender finds out you're not me, he'll have you sprung in an hour. There won't be anything they can hold you on; all the papers on you will go back with the marshal and me."

"Well," said Harold, "I don't know—I can't help thinking something will go wrong."

"So what if it does?" snapped George, losing some of his patience now as their valuable time kept slipping away. It was after six o'clock already and the lockup was beginning to come awake. If he and Harold were going to change clothes they would have to do it quickly or it would be too late.

"Look," George said evenly, "if something should go wrong, you'd just be right back where you started. You wouldn't be any worse off than you are right now. At least if we try it, you've got a chance of getting out." He paused a moment, then added ominously, "Or maybe you want to go back and face Tulo?"

Harold stiffened at the mention of Big Al's name. "No—no, I don't! I'm not crazy! I don't want to get killed!"

"Well, act like it then!" George said sharply. He started unbuttoning his shirt. "Come on, let's make the switch while there's still time."

Quickly, without giving it any more thought, Harold started undressing.

At eight thirty, about an hour after they had finished the sugarless oatmeal and black coffee the jailer had brought in, an officer from the booking squad came down to take Harold out. George, now neatly dressed in Harold's clothes, winked and gave Harold a confident nod just before he stepped out of the cell to be taken away. He thought Harold looked a little sick and only hoped that he wouldn't crack during the next thirty-six hours. Time was the essential element in the plan; if Harold blew the whistle too soon, the whole thing would come apart. George kept his fingers crossed all the way upstairs.

In the booking office he was given an envelope containing Harold's personal effects—watch, wallet and comb—and a second, smaller envelope containing seventy-two dollars and some change. That would just about cover the bus fare to get back to his safe deposit box, George thought. He signed a receipt for the articles; the booking officer didn't even bother to compare the signatures.

They took him into the release office and he waited there until he was called into one of the private offices. Inside he was met by a uniformed jail captain and a younger man, husky and clean-cut looking, wearing a business suit. *The marshal*, thought George. *My escort out of here; my ticket away from a twenty-year rap.*

The captain read aloud the federal court order for Harold's extradition, then gave George a copy and formally released him into the custody of the marshal. The young man stepped over to George and pulled out a pair of handcuffs.

"My name's Downer," he said evenly. "You and I are taking the morning train to Kansas City. It's a fourteen-hour trip. You can make it easy or you can make it hard. It's up to you."

All business, George thought. *Real stuffy type. Probably won't even talk to me the whole trip. Oh well, so what. I've got no complaints. I'm doing okay.* He smiled easily as the cuffs were snapped on his wrists. "You'll get no trouble from me," he said politely. "All I want to do is get it over with."

"That's fine," said the marshal. "Let's get going then; the train leaves in less than an hour."

Downer said goodbye and shook hands with the captain, then he and George went out to the back of the building where a radio car was waiting to drive them to the depot.

At the terminal Downer thanked the driver, then he and George went inside. Downer checked their tickets at the reservations desk. "We're in compartment six; car nine," he said, taking George's arm loosely and directing him toward the passenger

gates. On the way, Downer stopped at the cigar counter and picked up several magazines. "You smoke?" he asked.

"Yeah," said George, a little surprised.

"What brand?"

George told him and Downer brought him two packs of cigarettes. "Thanks," said George, feeling a little funny taking a favor from a cop. *Maybe it won't be such a bad trip after all*, he thought.

Downer paid for the purchases and took George's arm again. "Well, let's get aboard," he said. They walked through the gate and down a long incline toward the tracks.

"Nice of you," said George, indicating the cigarettes he still carried in his hand.

Downer smiled. "Well, it's going to be a long trip. Besides, it's not like you're actually a criminal; you're just a witness that got scared. Nobody can blame you much for that."

They came to car nine and climbed aboard. The porter was just putting Downer's suitcase on the luggage rack when they got to the compartment. Downer indicated the seat by the window and George sat down.

"What time do we get to Madison?" Downer asked the porter.

"Eleven A.M., suh," said the porter. "'Bout an hour after we pull out. It's the first stop. But I thought you gentlemen was goin' all the way through to Kansas City."

"I might want to get a wire off at Madison," said Downer by way of explanation. "Let me know ten minutes before we get there." He handed the porter a dollar.

"Yes, suh. Thank you, suh."

After the porter left, Downer took off George's cuffs and let him remove his coat, then handcuffed one of his wrists to the arm of the seat next to the window. Then Downer took off his own coat and hung it up. George noticed that he carried a .45 automatic in his shoulder holster.

Downer selected one of the magazines he had purchased and offered the others to George. "Like to read a little?" he asked.

"Yeah," said George, a little surprised for the second time. "Yeah, sure. Thanks."

Downer sat down in the single lounge chair and began to thumb idly through his magazine. *This guy's all right*, George thought. *Boy, you sure can't beat a federal cop for class. Real gentlemen.*

A few minutes later the train moved out of the terminal and made its way slowly out to the city limits. Then it gradually picked up speed until it was streaking past the broad flat farmlands at ninety-five miles an hour. The country flashed by the window and George sat holding the magazines on his knees and watching the

scenery. After awhile he looked back at Downer and studied him momentarily. The young man was reading intently, his face serious but not stern. George noticed a class ring on one of his fingers. *College man*, he thought. He reached for a cigarette. It occurred to him that he wouldn't even have any smokes if it had not been for Downer's thoughtfulness. He decided to try an attempt at conversation.

"Say, how'd a nice young fella like you ever get a job like this anyway?" he asked pleasantly.

Downer looked over at him and smiled. "A man has to make a living," he said. "Besides, I like the work I do. One of the main things in life is to like your work, don't you think so?"

"I guess you're right," said George, thinking of his own work. He had to admit he had always liked it. Except, of course, for the three times he got caught.

"How about you?" asked Downer. "You're an accountant, aren't you?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Yeah, sure." Watch it, he warned himself.

"I imagine that pays pretty well, doesn't it?"

"Well, yeah, pretty good," said George.

"Especially working for someone like Al Tulo, eh?"

George remembered the story Harold had told him a few hours earlier. "Well, you see," he explained, "I didn't exactly work for Tulo himself. I worked for this outfit that took care of his books, that's all."

Downer nodded. "You must know a lot about those books for Tulo to try so hard to keep you out of court."

"Yeah—well, I guess so," said George.

The conversation lagged after awhile and George turned back to the window. In its reflection he noticed that Downer had resumed reading. *Wonder how old Harold's making out?* he thought. *Boy, that poor sucker is really going to get it when they find out what's happened. No judge in the world is going to believe he didn't know what he was doing when he went to court in my place. They'll probably give him five years just on general principles. Oh well, better him than me.*

A few minutes later there was a knock at the door. Downer got up and opened it a few inches. It was the porter.

"Pulling into Madison in ten minutes, suh," he said. "Did you want that telegram sent?"

"No, I changed my mind," said Downer. He pulled out another dollar and handed it through the door. "Thanks anyway."

George eyed Downer curiously as he closed the door. "Tip kind of heavy, do you?" he said.

Downer smiled. "Kind of." He came over and picked up the

magazines from the seat beside George. "Through with these?" he asked.

George nodded and watched as Downer took his suitcase off the rack, opened it, and put the magazines inside. He was surprised then to see Downer putting on his coat. "Going someplace?" he asked, half jokingly.

"Getting off here," said Downer, smiling. He bent over the suitcase, his back to George, and rummaged around inside for a moment.

"What do you mean?" said George. "I thought I was going all the way to Kansas City?"

"You are," said Downer, "but I'm not."

The young man turned around then and George saw what he was doing. Very professionally, Downer was fitting a heavy silencer onto the barrel of his .45.

"You didn't think Mr. Tulo was going to let you get on that witness stand, did you, Harold?" he said easily.

George swallowed loudly. So that was it! This guy was no marshal, he was a torpedo! That was why he asked the porter what time we got to Madison. George had a sudden wild urge to burst out laughing.

"Now wait a minute, pal," he said quickly, "you've got the wrong boy. I'm not Harold. My name's George Maxwell. We pulled a switch, see? Back at the jail. We—"

Downer smiled widely. "Oh, come on now, Harold. You're not going to try and con me, are you?" The silencer was in place now and he drew the slide back and let it slam forward, throwing a round into the chamber.

"Look, I'm telling you the truth!" said George urgently. "I was up on an armed robbery beef, see, and they put this square, Harold, in the cell with me. We pulled a switch, I tell you!"

"Sure, Harold," said Downer. "Sure, you did."

George sat with his mouth hanging open, his eyes wide, looking helplessly at the clean-cut young man before him. He still had that crazy urge to burst out laughing when the young man shot him in the head. 🦋

THE STORY THAT WON

The October Mysterious Photograph contest was won by Dale L. Baker of Portland, Oregon. Honorable mentions go to James A. Stewart of Butler, Pennsylvania; Robert V. Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; Lorrie Lavin of Medina, New York; Adrian Ludens of Rapid City, South Dakota; L. Carroll Kiser of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; Gigi Vernon of Freeville, New York; Todd Outcalt of Brownsburg, Indiana; and Mike Befeler of Boulder, Colorado.



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THE DEAD RIDE FREE

DALE L. BAKER

"So what's he doing here?" shrieked one young woman, an indignant frequent rider of Route 24 to Burlington Heights. A young man in a suit delicately pulled the newspaper to the floor of the bus so they could get a better look at the lifeless face behind the news. He certainly looked dead. That is, he didn't move from his sprawl against the window seat. His face was frozen. Eyes open. Lips slightly parted. His hand was still clutching a paper coffee cup. It was empty, but fragrant mocha residue lingered on the bottom.

The crowd around the lifeless rider grew, producing a buzz that eventually caught the attention of the driver. His glare filled the huge mirror over his head. He was a powerful man who didn't make unnecessary stops. Not for wrestling teenagers. Not for women in labor. But the din from the back of the bus became louder than all radio, crowd, and traffic sounds.

Without warning, he braked. The driver stepped into the aisle, armed with his thermos. His scowl came closer, as his boots thumped deliberately. The throng of passengers parted, leading him to the stiff coffee drinker with the empty cup.

"What?" the driver grinned. "You never saw a dead guy before? I told him he could ride for free if he would taste my coffee." He unscrewed the thermos, the smell of acrid espresso wafting under their noses. "Anybody else want to try for a free pass?"

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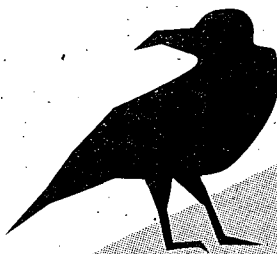
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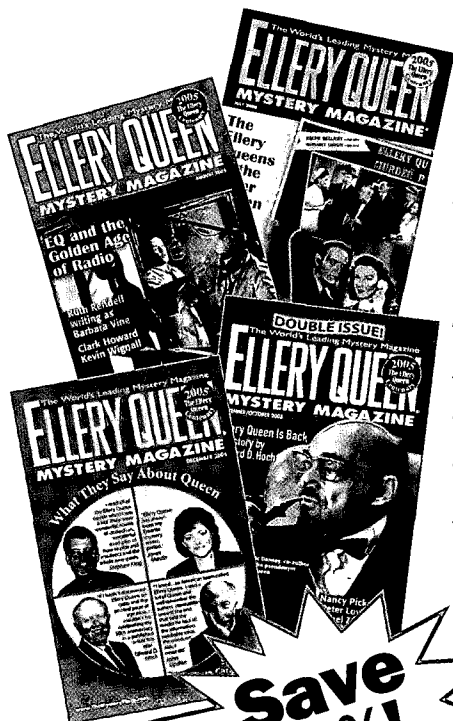
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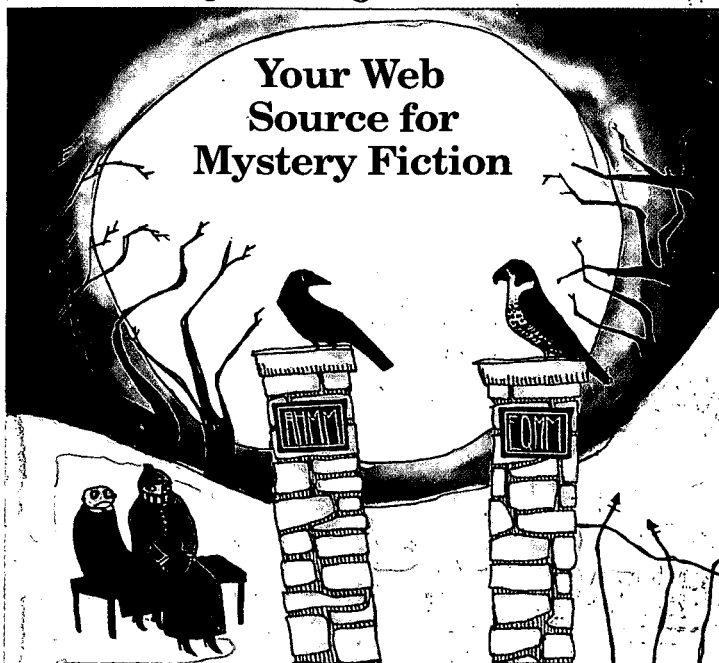
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